

The Continued Relevance of the 'Third World' Concept

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NICO SMIT, MAR 26 2013

The Need for a Revival of Third Worldism and the Continued Relevance of the Concept of the Third World

Introduction

The end of the Cold War, some have argued,[1] has dealt the 'three worlds' classification scheme a fatal blow, and the break-up of the former Soviet Union and the associated disintegration of the Second World has, to a large extent, diminished the rationale which underlay the concept of the Third World.[2] Furthermore, from its heyday in the 1970s, Third Worldism has been on a path of terminal decline due to a number of factors, such as disproportionate economic development among Third Worldist states,[3] political differences and the failure to establish a "common programme for *international economic and political reform*." [4] Within the literature relating to Third Worldism, the concept of the Third World itself, and the three worlds scheme, there is a lively debate, with some arguing that the concept has become an anachronism,[5] and others maintaining that the concept maintains significance in the contemporary era. Furthermore, while there is general consensus within the literature that Third Worldism has experienced a declining trend, some argue that there is both the need and space for a revival of Third Worldism.[6] This essay will argue that the concept of the Third World maintains relevance within the contemporary era, and that there is indeed a need for a revival of Third Worldism. To this end, the essay is divided into four parts. Part one provides a discussion of the emergence of Third Worldism, as well as that of the term Third World itself. In part two, focus shifts to the decline of Third Worldism and a number of critiques of the concept of the Third World are put forward. The third part argues for the continued relevance of the concept, as well as for the need to revive Third Worldism, and part four concludes.

Emergence and Historical Significance of Third Worldism and the Concept of the Third World

The term Third World first appeared in a 1952 article entitled, '*Three Worlds, One Planet*' by Alfred Sauvy,[7] in which he argued that reference is often made to two worlds in a state of confrontation, and that there is in fact a third world which is generally overlooked – and that this third world is the most significant, and in fact, in a chronological sense it is the first world.[8] The term Third World is used as both a category and a concept – emerging first with Sauvy, as mentioned above, the "phrase used was *tiers monde*." [9] Within a decade of its inception, the term had gained widespread acceptance and was employed extensively.[10] Since the early 1960s, the term has frequently been used as a "synonym for such phrases as 'underdeveloped world', 'developing countries', 'less developed countries', 'former colonies', 'Afro-Asian and Latin American countries', 'the South' (of the North-South division) and so on." [11]

The concept emerged in the context of the Cold War,[12] and as used initially, carried "specific political and power connotations," [13] and embraced notions "political powerlessness, economic poverty and social marginalization." [14] The concept was roughly understood and used as an expression analogous to that of the 'Third Force' that referred to and described the group of Nonaligned African and Asian countries, psychologically united in common opposition to imperialism and colonialism.[15] Within the Cold War context of ideological bifurcation, the Third World referred to that group of states "that represented the third component in the operation and dynamics of a bipolar global balance." [16] This Nonaligned Group "necessarily occupied a political space between the First World capitalist

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states and the Second World socialist states,”[17] and it was through this nonalignment that this group of states attempted to maintain independence and a distance between the two opposing superpower blocs, and if and when possible, to benefit from this division.[18] The term Third World emerged as part of the three worlds classification scheme, which, while it retained currency, seemed compelling as it served a dual function, namely “a hegemonic conceptualization of the world, and of struggles against that hegemony.”[19] The three worlds idea itself emerged as an unintended consequence of “modernization discourse in Euro-American social science,”[20] which was developed in the 1950s as a response to the “entanglement of colonialism and anti-colonial movements in an emergent Cold War that impelled the globe to division between two major power blocs.”[21] In political terms, modernization discourse aimed to ensure and prolong Euro-American hegemony, as it was a representation of Euro-American cultural, political and social paradigms – “the paradigms of capitalist modernity – as the ultimate paradigms of progress.”[22] However, it is ironic to note that once the idea of the Third World emerged, it was enthusiastically adopted by “radical advocates of liberation from Euro-American colonialism and hegemony”[23] who perceived it as both a mobilizing idea to accomplish the missions of decolonization and as a mechanism by which to reorganize global relationships.[24]

While many organizations and governments were employing the term Third World as a means towards stimulating “politico-diplomatic unity”[25] in Africa, Latin America, Asia and Oceania, and the Middle East, the concept also became crucial to European and North American attempts to control those areas of the globe which lay beyond the Soviet bloc.[26] Modernization theory has, since 1945, imposed a romanticized and idealized account of Western European and North American history on the Middle East, Asia and Oceania, Africa and Latin America.[27] This is an approach which enjoys continued hegemony at the policy and popular level, and, in a number of academic circles, postulates a ‘developed’ and modern Western Europe and North America, where the “problem of ‘development’ had been solved,”[28] as opposed to an ‘underdeveloped’ and ‘traditional’ Third World. With regards to this, Berger refers to the argument made by Arturo Escobar, that by representing the Third World as ‘underdeveloped’, one is not making a statement about ‘facts’, but rather establishing a regime of truth by means of which the Third World is inescapably known, managed and intervened.[29] During the past four decades or more, knowledge and information have been extracted from different parts of the globe and “filtered through an array of intellectual and policy processes dominated by the so-called First World, the effect of which has been to contribute to the managing of the Third World.”[30] Like approaches which preceded it, modernization theory was “committed to a period of tutelage”[31] and emphasized the requirement of cultural transformation of the Third World as a precondition for the achievement of modernity. The theory focused on the ‘entirety’ of change, and perceived “modernization as a process, often called ‘diffusion’, which spread throughout a society affecting economics, the type of government, social structure, values, religion and family structure.”[32] Proponents of this approach saw “underdevelopment in the Third World”[33] as the consequence of shortcomings which were internally specific to the underdeveloped societies under investigation – underdevelopment was perceived as rooted in their pre-colonial history rather than a consequence of their colonial past. Modernization theory was built on a homogenous vision of the Third World inevitably following the Western European and North American path.[34]

It has been shown above how the concept of the Third World was appropriated by modernization theory to maintain Western European and North American hegemony; focus will now shift to another theoretical approach which also made use of the concept of the Third World – namely dependency theory – but which approached the question of development/underdevelopment from a different perspective. The US-driven task of modernizing the Third World had, by the latter part of the 1960s, increasingly come under challenge by economic nationalism and revolution in Asia, Africa and Latin America.[35] Within these conditions “distinct radical discourses”[36] relating to the Third World surfaced to dispute and contest the dominant policy and academic discourses.[37] To a large number of radical critics, the ideas of modernization theory, and policies of the US government that were based on these ideas, “seemed to mask a narrow political agenda that sought to justify the dominance of three-market capitalism as a model and mechanism for economic, social and cultural development.”[38] One significant response to this agenda was the argument that “dependence on the West”[39] had as a consequence the distortion of social and economic conditions in non-Western states, resulting in shared experience of historical change in the peripheral areas of the global economy.[40] This was the result of a “situation in which the economy of certain countries (and hence their social and political structures) is conditioned by the development and expansion of another economy to which the former is subjected.”[41] Accounts such as these provided the building blocks for a large literature on ‘dependency’

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and 'underdevelopment' during the 1960s and 1970s, which questioned the notion that Third World states would ever realize developmental goals "while they remained subject to the global reach of the advanced capitalist economies of the West, and also suggested that their experience of exploitation within that system might give them a common cause."^[42]

Although never a unified voice, the dependency school contained important differences of opinion relating to the question of whether or not development was at all possible within the prevailing international economic system – with some scholars emphasizing the "structural barriers to development that followed from the division of the world economy into 'core' and 'periphery'."^[43] Other writers focused on "associated dependent development,"^[44] and argued that this was possible under "appropriate local political encouragement."^[45] A significant aspect of the 'underdevelopment' approach stemmed from "frustration with the activities of states economic planners in Third World countries,"^[46] and the ties between these and "the activities of regional and international development organizations"^[47] that was experienced by academics and progressive intellectuals on the edges (ideological and literal) of such institutions. It is from this frustration that a sense of shared identity grew around the "plight of those suffering from underdevelopment both in the periphery and in some radical opinion in core countries."^[48] Although not necessarily making up part of underdevelopment theory, this "identification of a homogenous condition of dependency – which was not very different from the homogenous view of the Third World that modernization theory constructed"^[49] – but ideas such as these certainly provided a basis for a number of its popular variants, and "fed into a perception of the inhabitants of Third World countries as victims rather than agents of their history."^[50] One such effect was a rapid increase in the use of the term 'Third World' during the latter stages of the 1960s and the 1970s, which has been associated with the "emergence of a growing consciousness among the peoples of different Third World Countries themselves that they shared common problems and experiences in relation to other countries."^[51]

The above discussion has focused on the concept of the Third World, its emergence and the ends to which the concept was employed by the discourses of modernization and dependency theory. The remainder of this section will focus on the emergence of Third Worldism. Mark T. Berger traces the roots of Third Worldism to the "complex milieu of colonialism and anti-colonial nationalism in the early 20th century,"^[52] and locates the "overall consolidation of Third Worldism"^[53] as rooted in the post-1945 context of the Cold War, national liberation and decolonization. The term Third World had its genesis in the notion of a 'third way' or 'third force' in global affairs, and as has been mentioned, Alfred Sauvy is credited with the first use of the term.^[54] The 1955 Bandung Conference, which brought together delegations from newly independent states or nationalist movements from Africa and Asia,^[55] was the first attempt at the creation and establishment of such a third force in global politics, and is generally seen as the moment marking the emergence of the Third World.^[56] As has been mentioned, the term Third World was adopted to refer to a self-defining group of nonaligned states^[57] caught between the ideological bifurcations of the Cold War, who found within their shared experiences a rally point from which to resist Western European and North American hegemony and complete the project of decolonization, as well as a mechanism by which to reorganize global relationships.^[58]

The Bandung Conference played significant role in "mobilizing the counter-hegemonic forces of what was to become known as the Third World,"^[59] as at the conference ten principles were proposed which were grounded in the Pancha Silla.^[60] This refers to "the five principles of peaceful coexistence"^[61] proposed by India and China; however, the ten principles were not limited to these, and also included anti-imperialism, anti-colonialism, non-violence and conflict resolution via the United Nations.^[62] Furthermore, the Bandung Conference concluded with a final communiqué which "condemned all 'manifestations' of colonialism,"^[63] and as a result was seen not only as a criticism to the formal colonialism associated with Western Europe, but was also perceived as directed towards the occupation of Eastern Europe by the Soviet Union and American neocolonialism.^[64] Within this final communiqué there was a call for: increased cultural and technical cooperation between African and Asian governments; "the establishment for an economic development fund to be operated by the United Nations; increased support for human rights and the self determinations of peoples and nations...and negotiations to reduce the building and stockpiling of nuclear weapons."^[65] In the Cold War context, the Bandung Conference marked the emergence of a nonaligned bloc from the two superpowers, and Hee-Yeon Cho argues that the "Bandung spirit is not 'detachment' from the powerful Western countries, but non-aligned self-helped 'organization against' the powerful countries."^[66]

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In this regard, the Bandung spirit should be understood as “one of ‘anti-predominance.’”[67] Traditionally nonalignment referred to isolationism, but this Third Worldist interpretation thereof “meant positive action for protecting the interests of the weak and achieving positive aims, which included peace and public regulation of the international regime, on the basis of active alliance and formation of ‘trans-border’ solidarity.”[68] It is important to remember that the “Third World coalition is essentially a political coalition,”[69] and as a result, an optimal explanation therefore will make reference to certain organizational and structural characteristics of the international political economy.[70] Firstly, developing country unity stems from the fact that these states are unable to exert significant (if any) influence on global events.[71] The international power structure is “dominated by the advanced industrialized countries,”[72] and by focusing on any generally accepted measure of power – i.e. military, economic, ideological, cultural or political – the leading Western states emerge as the major actors in the international system.[73] To a large extent, decision-makers of Third World states experience feelings of marginalization in, and by, “the global dominance system.”[74] Thus, this lack of ability to exert influence on policy-making, coupled with the material weakness, referred to above provides strong incentive and powerful motivation “for the establishment of an alliance of the powerless.”[75]

Furthermore, Caroline Thomas asserts that Third World states were distinguished by two significant characteristics which also served as a rallying point around which to mobilize. Firstly, based on their position in the global economy, these states perceive “themselves as vulnerable to external factors beyond their control, and to decisions and policies”[76] – predominantly economic – in which they shared no ownership. Secondly, Third World states “were home to the majority of the world’s poor who endured every day survival risks associated with grave social problems.”[77] These two common characteristics triggered shared and interrelated concerns: “the desire exercise greater control over national economies, and to accelerate national development via policies such as the consolidation of a large state sector and import substitution.”[78] A central aspect of the strategy to address these issues was the “call in 1974 for a New International Economic Order (NIEO).”[79]

The second half of this section has dealt with the emergence of Third Worldism, focusing on the Bandung Conference, and the shared issues around which Third World states have mobilized. The following section builds on this by taking as its point of departure the heyday of Third Worldism in the 1970s, tracking its decline from there, and, with regards to the first part of this section, will discuss a number of critiques of the concept of the Third World.

Decline of Third Worldism and Critiques of the Concept

Although there was no sequel to the Bandung Conference, the 1961 Belgrade Non-Aligned Summit conference established an alternative platform for “negotiating the diplomatic solidarity of countries which saw an advantage in advertising their autonomy from the rival superpower blocs.”[80] The rhetoric, membership and aims of the group of states “represented at the Non-Aligned summits of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s”[81] expanded and contracted considerably as time progressed. During the early stages of the 1960s, primary focus was directed towards mitigating the effects of the Cold War, “as represented by the British and French invasion of the Suez, and the Russian invasion of Hungary in 1956, on states which were not part of any power bloc.”[82] Towards the middle of the 1960s, the crucial concern was anti-colonialism, and from the close of that decade through to the next, the principle issues centered on “problems of economic development,”[83] specifically those emerging due to intense uncertainty in the global economy.[84]

What Mark T. Berger refers to as the “second-generation Bandung regimes,”[85] namely those of the 1960s-70s, marks the “great age of Third World rhetoric of common cause and common action.”[86] These regimes “increasingly intersected with a major revolutionary wave between 1974 and 1980...and reflected a more radical, more unambiguously socialist, Third Worldism than the first-generation Bandung regimes.”[87] A significant event for second generation Third Worldism was the 1966 Tricontinental Conference of Solidarity of the Peoples of Africa, Asia and Latin America, and involved delegates from across Asia, the Middle East, Africa and Latin America.[88] This conference called for an increasingly “radical anti-imperial agenda”[89] which positioned the participants squarely in the socialist camp at a time when the participant states formally stressed their independence from Maoist China and the USSR.[90] Whether directly or indirectly associated with the tricontinentalism of the 1960s and 1970s, it “represented the practical complement to the rise and spread of dependency theory.”[91]

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The increasing influence of dependency theory, and the claim that the Third World is located in an international political system characterised by a deep-rooted and progressively expanding asymmetry and a causal relationship between the (over)development of some states and the underdevelopment of others, facilitated the legitimization of a “common agenda for changing the structure of international relations – especially of international economic relations – on which that asymmetry seemed to rest.”[92] During the 1970s, the collective identity of the majority of Latin American, Asian and African countries in “international relations became expressed through demands for reform in the institutional structure of the international economy.”[93] The main thrust here came from the Group of 77 (G77), which had been created at the first United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) meeting held in 1964.[94] During the early stages of the 1970s, as “severe external shocks hit the international economy,”[95] the G77 headed the “demand for new institutions of global economic management to remove the structural imbalances that, as they saw it, frustrated the development of countries outside the OECD and Comecon.”[96]

The effectiveness of this campaign was evidenced “by the passing of the Charter of Economic Rights and Duties of States and the Declaration,”[97] as well as the Declaration of a NIEO at a special session of the UN General Assembly in 1974.[98] The demand for a NIEO was preceded by, and to some extent bolstered by, the 1973 oil crisis;[99] this call was “based on the implementation of 25 objectives”[100] relating to international trade, international assistance and aid, social issues, technology transfer and industrialization. These objectives were to be realised in ways that would guarantee the states’ economic sovereignty, “including their right to control the exploitation of natural resources, with the right to nationalize them of appropriate.”[101] In hindsight, it becomes clear that the UN resolutions passed in 1974 relating to the NIEO signalled the zenith of the diplomatic unity of Third World regimes that had challenged Western hegemony, and in rhetoric that was linked to the “international economic relations of development.”[102]

The changes called for in the NIEO never materialized and were never implemented. As the 1970s drew to a close, the Third World coalition’s ability at the UN to exert influence for change was diminishing as their capacity to employ their primary weapon – “the threat of commodity boycotts for a range of primary products and minerals in the manner of the OPEC manipulation of oil prices”[103] – suffered a loss of credibility. Furthermore, OPEC’s increasing influence had the adverse effect of weakening Third Worldism, rather than strengthening it.[104] The emergence anti-communist, oil-rich, conservative nation states, especially in the Middle East, often with robust ties to the US, represented a significant barrier to the “realisation of the NIEO and the wider Third Worldist project.”[105] The 1980s brought what Mark T. Berger has referred to as the “climacteric of the Third World.”[106] The outbreak of violence between the ‘red brotherhood’ of Cambodia, Vietnam, China and Laos towards the end of the 1970s underlined the evident “failure of socialist internationalism and its close relative, Third Worldism.”[107] In more general terms, by the start of the 1980s, the US-driven globalisation project provided a significant challenge to the importance allocated to the restructuring of the global economy so as to “address the North-South divide.”[108] With the Debt Crisis and world recession in the early stages of the 1980s, the UN backed idea of a NIEO disappeared from the agenda, dislodged by the globalisation project.[109] The World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, supported by the Reagan administration, Prime Minister Thatcher in the UK, and Chancellor Kohl in the former West Germany, encouraged Third World governments to undertake the privatisation of public sectors, the liberalisation of trade and the deregulation of financial sectors.[110] This trend intersected with a renewal of hostilities that characterised the Cold War, which further facilitated the decline of the NAM.[111]

However, well before the end of the Cold War came about, the demise of the Bandung era and the deterioration of Third Worldism could be found in the Asia-Pacific, as for a number of onlookers the “economic success of the Newly Industrialising Countries of Northeast and Southeast Asia”[112] had towards the end of the 20th century “called into question many of the tenets of, and the need for, Third Worldism.”[113] For a growing number of influential neoliberals, the Third Worldist claim that the hierarchical nature of the global economy was an obstacle to Third World development was undermined by the “capitalist transformation of Asia.”[114] From this point of view and from that of supporters of state-driven development as well, the idea of a Third World carried continued relevance, but now the developing Third World states “could become successful late-developers”[115] by imitating the Asian Newly Industrialising Countries (NICS). Coinciding with this, towards the end of the 1970s, the “successful capitalist development in East Asia had displaced the socialist agenda contained in the idea of the Third World or Third Worldism.”[116] Ideologically speaking, Third Worldism was progressively marginalised in Asia by attempts to

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advance a “distinctly post-Third Worldist Pan-Asianism”[117] rooted in state-mediated capitalist development.[118]

A reduction in demand for primary products, “declining terms of trade for their exports, rapidly rising costs of debt repayment and re-borrowing,”[119] internal issues relating to “agricultural productivity and natural disaster”[120] resulted in large scale “economic failure in Africa,” ultimately undermining the legitimacy, vitality and strength of a large number of Third World states.[121] Furthermore, when the curtain came down on the Cold War late in the 1980s, “the removal of the possibility of Soviet support”[122] had a limiting effect on the significance of “existing African governments as allies in the geopolitical war of position between the superpowers,”[123] as well as the ability of Third World states to “conclude favourable bargains for outside assistance.”[124] These shifts had significant effects on the psychological and political ties which held the Third World coalition together, since the UN ceased to be a key platform for the pursuit and achievement of structural reform of the international political economy.[125]

Thus far, the discussion in this section has traced the decline of Third Worldism from its golden age of the second generation Bandung regimes. From here, the remainder of this section will focus on critiques levelled against the concept of the Third World. The most widespread critique of the concept of the Third World is closely linked to the three worlds classification scheme and the end of the Cold War – critics argue that the collapse of what was the Second World, namely the Soviet Union and its satellite states, has made the Third World largely redundant.[126] Since the end of the Cold War there has been a general tendency to replace the three worlds scheme with a much simplified “North-South dichotomy,”[127] or some variation thereof. Furthermore, as a concept used to describe a group of states of “comparable economic situation in the international system,”[128] the ‘Third World’ is seemingly no longer a suitable label, and the example of the Asian NICS is cited in support of this claim. Hans-Henrik Holm asserts that the development of states such as Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore and South Korea, along with other countries such as Mexico and Brazil, have served to disprove the Third Worldist claim that self-reinforcing and coherent development in the Third World is not possible.[129] Also, the growing differentiation of states within the “international system renders the flat categories ‘developed’ and ‘developing’ countries useless,”[130] and this growing economic differentiation has served to underline the political differences between Third World states.[131] This of course also questions the homogenising effect a label such as the Third World had on those who were known under it.

If one takes an international economic approach to the matter, Holm further argues that the Third World is not a particularly relevant concept.[132] The contemporary economic system is so extensive that all states rely on “the same economic mechanisms.”[133] Over the medium- to long-term, the ability for any one state to retreat into isolationism is virtually zero – something which is evidenced by Gorbachev’s 1988 speech to the UN, signalling the acceptance thereof by a superpower such as the Soviet Union.[134] The possibilities of a Third Worldist move to isolationism or a drive to establish a political movement aimed at bringing about structural change to the international political economy is doomed to failure – evidenced by the lack of implementation of the NIEO.[135] The structure of the international system is based on the size of states, the extent of their development and their importance in key economic areas, and the “international economic role of the Third World is that of adaptation, not reformation.”[136] Furthermore, some critics argue that as a political concept, the Third World is not of much use, as there is no fundamental agreement regarding essential political issues in the Third World.[137] Both the G77 and the NAM are currently experiencing more division than in the past – there is no open disagreement or failure, but any form of common action or any “common political platform”[138] is lacking also.

The following criticisms are “informed by antithetical readings of the new world situation,”[139] namely the demise of socialism in the 1980s, and the neo-liberal triumphalism that ensued. The first is founded in postcolonial criticism, “which has raised questions about all ‘foundational’ histories.”[140] ‘Post-foundational history’, as it is known, in its refutation of structure and essence and “simultaneous affirmation of heterogeneity, also repudiates any fixing of the Third World subject, and therefore of the Third World as a category.”[141] Although this does not translate into a direct rejection of the concept of the Third World itself, but rather the Third World as a static category, the concept itself “appears as a discursive construct, constructed in different ways according to historical contexts and ideological dispositions.”[142] A second criticism is directed towards the elimination of the three worlds classification scheme.[143] Arif Dirlik summarises these criticisms as follows: firstly, the concept of the Third World is a discursive construct which “bears no ‘inherent’ relationship to the reality it represents,”[144] but rather is the outcome of the

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“ideological structuring of the world into three parts.”[145] Carl Pletsch asserts that it is with Euro-American social science that primary responsibility lies, “with its hegemonic assumptions about the world that are rooted in the teleology of capitalism.”[146] Dirlik points to the work of Anouar Abdel-Malek, who had already identified “the complicity of Third World intellectuals”[147] in this regard, and finally maintains that recent criticism of the concept has been increasingly “insistent on questioning the instrumentality of the Third World concept in nationalism and nationalist historiography, in which Third World status privileges the nation and the national struggle as a means to overcome that status” – this being the identification of Third World political classes and intelligentsia as actively taking on the “role of ‘compradors’ on behalf of the different hegemonic powers...accepting the vision of themselves as the West’s Third World.”[148]

Secondly, Dirlik asserts that states which make up the Third World are represented by means of a residual category and, as a result, are not afforded an “autonomous existence of their own, and are placed temporarily in one or another available transition from a backward to an advanced status.”[149] Finally, the concept of the Third World wipes out the heterogeneity of societies referred to as such, as well as the internal differences of those societies.[150] The critique made by Pletsch is directed at the former, “without any clear specification of where differences are to be located,”[151] and criticism from the postcolonial perspective demands heterogeneity at both the national and international levels, “bringing a postmodernist sensibility to the question of difference, which ultimately resides in the politics of ‘location’ or ‘identity.’”[152] Aijaz Ahmad’s criticism, namely that which is directed at the three worlds scheme and the homogenising effects of that which is known as the Third World, “locates the fundamental difference at the level of classes that cut across national boundaries, which, ironically gives primacy to intranational over international differences.”[153]

The second part of this section has provided a number of critiques of the concept of the Third World, and has, in providing these critiques and the decline of Third Worldism, so to say, set the stage for the final section: that which will argue for a revival of Third Worldism, and that the concept of the Third World carries with it continued relevance in the contemporary era.

The Need for a Revival of Third Worldism and the Continued Relevance of the Concept Itself

The arguments that will be presented here in defense of the concept of the Third World are grouped around three major themes: namely, geopolitics, the Third World as a “reference point for development in global politics,”[154] and what Arif Dirlik refers to as “global modernity.”[155] Starting with geopolitics, the answer to the question of whether or not the time has come to do away with “the Third World as an organizing concept,”[156] is not clear-cut, and the context (as always) plays an important role. Although the case can be made that the Third World as a “category is problematic for understanding and comparing the politics of different countries,”[157] it nevertheless remains both illuminating and relevant when the emphasis is on geopolitical relationships and processes.[158] Firstly, a “Third World-type category”[159] succeeds in drawing “attention to what continues to be a major axis”[160] of political and economic inequality. Making the statement that access to the opportunities and benefits of globalization have been disproportionately distributed among nations is truly an understatement, and while claims made by Berger and other globalization scholars that “increasingly the Third World...is becoming a world-wide social category rather than a geographically defined one”[161] may be true, this is merely a trend, and some way off from a completed process.[162] The stark material inequalities that characterize the contemporary world, such as “23% of the world’s population living in the North...enjoyed 85% of its income, while the 77% in the South made do with 15%,”[163] do have significant political and social consequences.[164] Secondly, given this enduring economic and political inequality amongst societies, “Third Worldist ‘discourse’”[165] has the potential to provide a powerful rallying-point and rhetoric. As ‘woman’, and more noticeably ‘black’, “have been political constructs,”[166] either transcending or obscuring the “actual complexities of experience and identity formation, but nonetheless with a strategic usefulness in particular political contexts,”[167] so too the term ‘Third World’ can “help to create as much as to reflect”[168] political solidarities and alignments.

Turning to the critique that the collapse of the Second World has rendered both the concept and the category of the Third World almost entirely politically insignificant, the fact that the Third World was primarily a concept that denotes (and continues to do so) “a point of reference for development in global politics,”[169] has meant that the concept

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has “retained a political utility that has survived the end of the Cold War.”[170] This political utility has stemmed first and foremost “from the conception that the idea of underdevelopment”[171] was essential to the territorially based idea of the Third World, “and to the ideological connotations expressed by it during the Cold War.”[172] There was an immediate and direct conceptual link between underdevelopment and the Third World.[173] From this point of view, “if the Third World is ‘anything’,”[174] it is an ideological and a political concept, and it is in this sense “that it continues to be utilized in political analyses of global inequality.”[175] The use of the concept in the latter sense is somewhat novel, to the extent that it “generally transcends the association of the term with territoriality...and, as such,”[176] aims to “capture and express, if not the idea of underdevelopment,”[177] then definitely increased vulnerabilities, risk, and new types of “social stratification in a global context.”[178] As an example, one can take the argument made by Caroline Thomas that, as we pass into the new millennium, instead of disappearing, the Third World is in fact becoming global.[179] She asserts that “the dynamic of economic driven globalization is resulting in the global reproduction of Third World Problems. Growing inequality, risk and vulnerability characterize not simply the state system, but an emerging global social order.”[180]

Arif Dirlik has identified two main reasons for the continued relevance of the term in both social science and political discourse. Firstly, the term Third World has been utilized as referring to a particular condition of life and to political activity in certain parts of the globe.[181] Although there has been “shifts in location and changes in the nature of political activity,”[182] which have had the effect of transforming not only the term’s spatialization, “but also the relationships of societies so designated with one another and with societies of other ‘worlds’.”[183] However, the conditions of life which are captured by the term “persist in many parts of the area designated as the Third World of an earlier period – the colonial/semi-colonial – and earliest of all, Sauvy’s first world in chronological terms.”[184] In some cases, these living conditions have worsened to an extent so dire that those living under them have been driven to the point of marginalisation, and have as a result transcended geographical boundaries separating the Three Worlds of an earlier age, rearranging those very boundaries.[185] As a result, the “concept becomes even more abstract than earlier in its de-territorialisation from fixed and stable geographical locations, but also acquires a concreteness in its direct association with a condition of life.”[186]

Secondly, the term finds enduring relevance “as an expression of a certain kind of politics,”[187] even though it is an expression that is drastically different in its objectives than a form of Third Worldism that was aimed almost exclusively at the capitalist/colonial First World societies. This is a politics which not only seeks the transformation of relations with the sole remaining hegemonic power, “but also with its uneasy allies in Europe, with the Second World of late Maoism,”[188] and with Third World nations, the politics of which appear to be trapped between “willing participation in a hegemonic neoliberalism and right-wing nativism, increasingly in some combination of the two.”[189] Ideologies of radical liberation have retreated on a global scale “with the loss of hope in the promises of socialism that earlier had nourished them,”[190] and in their wake, they have left suspicion and distrust of anything that resembles utopianism – “except the utopianism of capital, and atavistic promises of religious salvation, patriarchal order and ethnically pure politics, and the like, which all encourage political parochialism and epistemological nativism, along with compliance in the authoritarianism of leadership that represents or manipulates such values.”[191] This is what Dirlik refers to as global modernity.

The above section has argued that the concept of the Third World has, despite the demise of the Second World, retained continued relevance beyond the end of the Cold War and into the contemporary era. With regards to the need for a revival of Third Worldism, a number of the arguments made for the continued relevance of the concept of the Third World also relate to the need for a revival of Third Worldism: namely, continued economic and political inequality, and the argument made above regarding the Third World as referring to a particular condition of life. Returning to the ten principles espoused at the Bandung conference, “the five principles of peaceful coexistence”[192] first proclaimed by China and India, these represented an “imaginative reformulation of the of the Modern Western international political framework of the Westphalian system.”[193] It grounded the “cooperation among newly independent States on the Western principles of sovereign States adding to it a non-Western ethical position stressing mutual respect and mutual benefit in the place of the Western concept of international ‘anarchy’, which was at the root of the Westphalian system.”[194] The principles of peaceful coexistence proclaimed first by India and China were thus: (i) “a mutual respect of each-one’s full autonomy, within a world of nation states with equal rights,”[195] (ii) “‘equal benefit’ was a principle of non-exploitative economic cooperation, dear to all States

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with a memory of colonial exploitation,"[196] (iii) "the territorial sovereignty of all states was affirmed through the principle of 'non-intervention',"[197] (v) "the importance of the mutual respect of non-intervention was stressed by adding two principles related to this concept, one on territorial integrity, the other on non-interference in domestic affairs."[198]

The current "global hegemonic order (or disorder)"[199] appears to have effectively reigned the developing world in and extended its control over the developing world, and, in the process, has eliminated the "political economic projects of the Third World originating in Bandung." [200] Even though it apparently failed to implement its "political-economic projects, the variety of myths, utopias, and projects of which Bandung was the origin"[201] enjoys enduring relevance and remains compelling in their "critique of the political-economic myths and projects of the neo-colonial hegemonic alliance." [202] The following will discuss the contemporary "global hegemonic colonialist structures"[203] towards the aim of arguing for an establishment of a new "counter-hegemonic alliance"[204] based on a novel interpretation and understanding of the Bandung myth.

The structures of the international political economy can be characterised as consisting of three segments. The first is a global division of mega-competition between states and multi-national corporations (MNCs) at its core.[205] This section is comprised of MNC workers, technocrats, agents of global civil society and "intellectuals working at the new frontiers of high-tech R&D,"[206] who operate within the "neo-liberal framework of the global hegemonic governance." [207]

The second component, "peripheral to the first...serves the interest of the global hegemonic alliance, a passive subject of the global hegemony." [208] This section is made up of the "subaltern agents of the first sector," [209] including middle and small industries, a large portion of Third World countries incapable of competing with the states and the MNCs located in the first segment.[210] The final segment is made of all those sectors of the societies in both the North and the South, which are excluded even from the second sector.[211] A large number of social groups and categories, indigenous peoples, women, landless peasants, and many who have failed to realise their dream of joining the "mega-competition in the core," [212] face exclusion after suffering total exploitation. These agents, losers in this process, such as the owners and workers of middle and small sub-contracting factories make up the third component of the global economy.[213] The exclusionary nature and processes of the global economy is a source of insecurity "for all the subaltern exploited social formations and all the peoples in the South and in the North who are in the excluded segment of the global structures." [214] A number of colonial processes and relations of exclusion and exploitation "cross over in the surplus extraction from the South by the North, from women by men, from the rural by the urban sectors, from the local communities of each country by its metropole, from the ethnic minorities by the global 'majorities'." [215]

The structure of the international political economy as described above is somewhat different from that which prevailed during the Cold War era, when Third World states questioned legitimacy at Bandung.[216] The current international political economy has given rise to a situation in which all three segments are found in both the North and the South, "and where their difference lies only in their relative proportion." [217] It is as a result thereof that the counter-hegemonic force that was created at the Bandung Conference by Third World states cannot remain confined to Third World countries. This is a new brand of Third Worldism that should aim to include non-state actors in the subaltern and the excluded segments of the Trilateral regions." [218] This description of the contemporary international political economic structure could possibly result in the incorrect conclusion "that the historical bloc formed in Bandung by the emerging Third World nations"[219] is no longer valid "under the global colonial situation, which extracts surplus not only from the South but also from subaltern and excluded segments of the North." [220] If this novel exclusionary structure between the "Trilateral North and the Tri-Continental South"[221] had not been developed by the global hegemony, the return to Bandung in an attempt to re-establish "a new counter-hegemonic alliance"[222] is unwarranted.

The US and the Trilateral alliance to which it belongs are, however, creating a new division between the South and the North by means of their attempts at strengthening their security, both 'human' and national.[223] The strategy which the Trilateral North aims to employ to this end seeks to "guarantee the 'Human security of rich citizens of the Trilateral (North Atlantic plus Japan) security community," [224] all the while continuously undertaking 'humanitarian'

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interventions in the region of the Tri-Continental South. Despite the political-economic eradication of the borders dividing the North and the South, "the North/South divide is not filled, since the hegemonic security project of the New Global Colonial Order"[225] does not include the states of the South. Even the leaders of these states are forced to operate in a system where their autonomy is restricted, and face a situation where they find themselves compelled "to join in the ranks of the global hegemonic alliance fighting 'terrorism'".[226] This establishes a "new North/South exclusionary structure"[227] in which the myth of Bandung and its political-economic projects "become highly relevant for the building of a counter-hegemonic alliance." [228] Thus one sees the need for a revival of Third Worldism based on the 10 principles articulated at the Bandung Conference and guided by the Third Worldist projects which emerged from that conference.

Conclusion

Emerging in the context of the Cold War, the concept of the Third World was employed to various ends: namely as a means to control that which was known as the Third World, but also as a mobilising myth for the successful completion of decolonisation and for the establishment of a counter hegemonic alliance.[229] However, the end of the Cold War and the disintegration of the USSR and the disappearance of the Second World have called into question the relevance of the concept of the Third World,[230] and furthermore, a failure to implement its political economic projects as well as political differences,[231] has led to a decline in Third Worldism, to an extent where many scholars are questioning the very existence of the Third World. This essay has set out to argue that the concept of the Third World enjoys continued relevance in the contemporary era and has remained alive in both scholarly and public realms well beyond the end of the Cold War. To this end, arguments built around geopolitics, the concept of the Third World as a "reference point for development in global politics,"[232] and Dirlik's notion of "global modernity"[233] have been employed. This essay also aimed to argue that there is a need for a revival of Third Worldism in the contemporary era, and here, the main argument focused on the structure of the global political economy and global hegemony, and how this has given rise to a "new exclusionary structure between the Trilateral North and the Tri-Continental South,"[234] which warrants the creation and establishment of a "new counter-hegemonic alliance"[235] based on the Bandung principles – what I have argued for, namely a revival of Third Worldism.

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