

From the Third World to the Global South

Written by Alina Sajed

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ALINA SAJED, JUL 27 2020

The term 'Global South' is not an uncontroversial one. There have been many debates in the last few decades regarding its usefulness, both analytical and historical, but especially its connection to another equally debated term, 'Third World.' In the midst of these debates, however, there has appeared a loose consensus around their meaning and their linkages. I will attempt to elucidate here the meaning and histories of both terms, and the connections and ruptures between them. To do so, I will be drawing on the work of several Marxist intellectuals, such as L.S. Stavrianos and Vijay Prashad, among others. It must be emphasized, however, that the term Global South cannot be considered separately from that of the Third World. I argue that the idea of Global South could not have emerged without taking seriously the conceptual work done by the term Third World, and indeed without the legacy left by Third Worldism and its historical landmarks. The discussion below devotes significant space to understanding not only the emergence of the term Third World, but especially the central role played by processes of capitalist expansion to conceptualizing both Third World and Global South, albeit in different ways and at different historical junctures.

The great victory of the Vietnamese people at Dien Bien Phu is no longer strictly speaking a Vietnamese victory. From July 1954 onward the colonial peoples have been asking themselves: "What must we do to achieve a Dien Bien Phu? How should we go about it?" A Dien Bien Phu was now within reach of every colonized subject. – Frantz Fanon.

In his now classic work *Global Rift*, L.S. Stavrianos (1981: 35-36) argues that '[t]he overseas expansion of European capitalism resulted in the emergence of the Third World through the operation of imperialism.' This is, of course, an argument that draws on a rich Marxist tradition summarized by Karl Marx' famous dictum (articulated in his *Grundrisse*), according to which capital by its nature has to drive beyond every spatial barrier and conquer the whole earth for its market. Both Rosa Luxemburg's *The Accumulation of Capital* (1913) and Lenin's *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism* (1917) expanded on this idea. Luxemburg stated that capitalism needed to expand in new areas of the world untouched by capitalist forms of production, in search of natural resources, new markets, and (cheap or free) labour. Alex Callinicos (2002: 321) claims that Luxemburg inaugurated a Marxist tradition that examines the link between capitalist expansion and the violent domination and exploitation of the Global South. Stavrianos draws on this tradition of Marxist thought, which highlights that the very creation of the Third World is intimately connected to processes of capitalist expansion via colonial conquest, in other words, to processes of underdevelopment. The notions of 'underdevelopment' and 'overdevelopment' are crucial to understanding Stavrianos' conception of the Third World. He does not see them as separate, individual and discrete phenomena, rather they are tied together inseparably: Western nations are overdeveloped to the degree that Third World nations are underdeveloped (Stavrianos 1981: 35).

Here, Walter Rodney's work on processes of underdevelopment in Africa is especially pertinent: Rodney (1972) states that underdevelopment is not a product of internal factors of Third World societies, but rather the direct consequence of processes of capitalist expansion, and of the integration of these societies within the capitalist world system. The creation of the Third World was not simply about colonial conquest and incorporating these territories into European colonial empires. Rather (and especially), it had also to do with their active 'underdevelopment' by the colonial metropole through the extraction of raw natural resources and labour for the exclusive benefit of the metropole, and with devastating consequences for local economies, politics and societies. I understand

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'underdevelopment' here in the way articulated by dependency theorist A.G. Frank (1969) in his now classic piece 'The Development of Underdevelopment.' Here, Frank identifies underdevelopment as a conscious political action by the colonial metropole whereby resources belonging to the colonial society/periphery are being extracted and used, but used in a way which benefits dominant states and not the poorer states in which the resources are found. In that sense, according to dependency theory, Third World countries are not 'behind' or in need of 'catching up' to the richer countries of the world. They are not poor because they lagged behind the scientific transformations or lacked the Enlightenment values of the European states. They are poor because they were coercively integrated into the European economic system only as producers of raw materials or to serve as repositories of cheap labour, and were thus denied the opportunity to market their resources in any way that competed with dominant states.

It cannot be emphasized enough thus that the idea of Third World is inseparable from the emergence of global capitalism via colonial conquest and exploitation. The integration of colonial societies into capitalist circuits has permanently changed and restructured local economies with tremendous consequences both for the short term and, more importantly, for the long term. Here the idea of underdevelopment is crucial because it throws light on processes of exploitation and dependence that have begun a couple of centuries ago, and are still very much ongoing. Stavrianos (1981: 39) notes, for instance, that one of the distinguishing features of the Third World is the idea of 'economic growth without economic development', which refers to 'growth determined by foreign capital and foreign markets rather than by local needs.' His definition of the Third World is illuminating: it is not a set of countries or statistics, but rather 'a set of relationships – unequal relationships between controlling metropolitan centers and dependent peripheral regions, whether colonies as in the past or neocolonial "independent" states as today' (Stavrianos 1981: 40). To summarize, the idea of Third World is unthinkable without global capitalism and the rise of global hierarchies and inequality it produced. Here Marxist scholarship has made an invaluable contribution by exploring in depth the twin roots of colonial conquest and capitalist expansion behind the idea of Third World (see James 1938, Du Bois 1947, Rodney 1972, Amin 1976, Wallerstein 1989, Wolf 2010, Davis 2001, Anievas and Nisançioğlu 2015). It has also brought forward the idea that we cannot think and speak of issues such as poverty, war and conflict, environmental degradation and political corruption in the Third World/Global South outside of the global structures that produce and condition these phenomena (see Tsing 2005, Tilley 2020).

I would like to complicate, however, our understanding of the idea of Third World: this idea became a referent not only for a set of global relations of dependence and inequality, but also for 1) a global project premised on a certain common history of colonial domination and exploitation (loosely identified with the Bandung spirit and the emergence of non-alignment); 2) an ideological orientation that started with struggles of decolonization and that acquired global dimensions, whose heyday were the 1960s and 1970s (the so called 'long 1960s'), known as Third Worldism (see Sajed 2019). The former finds its conceptualization in Vijay Prashad's work *The Darker Nations*, where he claims that 'The Third World was not a place. It was a project' (2007: xv). Prashad puts forth the idea of a Third World project to refer to the emergence of a common ideology and a set of institutions that encapsulated its values and goals.

Arguably its best-known landmark is the Bandung conference, which took place in Bandung, Indonesia in April 1955, bringing together delegates from twenty-nine nations in Africa and Asia, representing either recently independent countries or those that were in the midst of national liberation struggles. Bandung is associated with the creation of a Third World bloc, that is with a global project that produced a 'transcontinental political consciousness in Africa and Asia' (Young 2001: 191). In the words of Quynh N. Pham and Robbie Shilliam (2016: 6), '[t]he Bandung Conference is remarkable insofar as it provided the first diplomatic space in 20th century international relations that promised an intimacy amongst colonized and postcolonized peoples.' One of the consequences of the conference was, as Vijay Prashad (2007: 41) observes, the creation of a United Nations bloc that would bring together representatives from Africa, Asia, and later Latin America and dominate the General Assembly for decades to come. Another significant legacy of Bandung was the articulation of an economic alternative for the Third World that was meant to provide a different path to development to that imposed by the dominant capitalist model. The UNCTAD (the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development), established in 1964, is the direct product of Bandung, and emphasizes engagement in trade and development by the Third World on an equitable basis.

The Third World project was thus a collective attempt to establish political and economic sovereignty for the former

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colonial world. The project would find a clearer articulation in 1966, in Havana, Cuba, at the First Solidarity Conference of the Peoples of Africa, Asia, Latin America, also known as the Tricontinental Conference, attended by more than 500 delegates from 82 countries. The resolutions adopted at the conference articulated an anti-imperialist platform for Third World countries against the aggressive foreign policy of the US and its allies. One of the legacies of the conference would be the project of a New International Economic Order (NIEO), which emerged in the 1970s as a proposed alternative to the exploitative capitalist system that dominated the global political economy.

The idea of NIEO was brought forth by the countries from the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) as a way to redress the dire inequalities of the global trade system. The initiative can be dated to the 1973 NAM conference in Algiers, where demands for more equitable economic policies for Third World countries would be put together formally and later forwarded for consideration to the General Assembly at the UN (Cox 1979, Prashad 2012, Anghie 2019). As Anthony Anghie (2019: 432) notes, the principle of 'permanent sovereignty over natural resources' was one of the core principles animating NIEO because it would allow Third World countries absolute economic sovereignty over the use and/or preservation of natural resources within their borders. It would thus not only allow them autonomy over the use of resources, but also protect them against predatory practices and interests of multinational corporations. Indeed, Greg Grandin (2019) argues it was Latin America that pioneered the idea of sovereignty over natural resources, idea which was formally adopted by the UN in 1962: 'In its 1917 constitution, Mexico was the first country in the world to adopt the principle that absolute sovereignty over natural resources belongs to the state.' Sadly, the points on the agenda of NIEO would never be realized: oil crises, the heavy indebtedness of Third World countries via devastating loan conditions, and consistent and active efforts by Western countries to stop and counteract this initiative would effectively stop the agenda of NIEO (see Stavrianos 1981, Prashad 2012, Anghie 2019).

It is thus the failure of the NIEO (and by failure, I mean the active efforts by Western interests to prevent this agenda from being implemented) that signals the demise of the Third World project, and the emergence of what Vijay Prashad (2012: 5) calls 'a new geography of production.' By the latter, he understands both the 'disarticulation of Northern Fordism' but also the rise of new technologies (satellite, communication/internet, containerization of ships) that re-structured dramatically global trade and production (ibid.). One well-known aspect of this is the relocation of production processes from the First to the Third World, thus allowing corporations to take advantage of wage differentials and of significantly fewer restrictions on environmental and labour standards. Prashad (2012) thus sees the idea of the Global South as associated with the rise of neoliberalism and this new geography of production. Prominent features of this shift have included: austerity measures (enforced in the South through the infamous Structural Adjustment Programs), financialization of the global economy (which saw the emergence of certain urban metropolises as hubs of the global financial industry, many of them in the Global South, such as Hong Kong, Singapore, Shanghai, Bahrain, Dubai, São Paulo), soaring rates of unemployment and wage disparities, feminization of workforce (especially in export processing zones).

It is important to make here the following conceptual distinction: whereas some scholars (Grovogui 2011) see an almost seamless continuum from the Third World to the Global South, others such as L.S. Stavrianos (1981) and Vijay Prashad (2012) see continuities but also fundamental ruptures and shifts. Some scholars indicate that the term Global South emerged in the 2000s, to indicate a new geopolitical arrangement after the end of the Cold War (see Dados and Connell 2012). The discussion here, however, is not particularly keen in exploring the provenance of the term but rather to flesh out the historical content behind both the Third World and the Global South, as concepts and realities. So, in some ways, Global South is not simply synonymous with Third World, though they may have overlapping features (and at times they are used interchangeably). Rather the idea of the Global South signals a critical historical juncture that can be dated back to the mid-1970s: the revival of neoliberalism, the demise of the Third World project (with its emphasis on developmentalism, and the quest for meaningful political and economic sovereignty), and the rise of what Jan Scholte (2005) called 'hypercapitalism.'

Writing in 1981, Stavrianos does not use the term Global South; however, ironically, he does note this exact shift by describing it as the Third Worldization of the First World, whereby he makes the argument that the re-location of production processes from the North to the South, and the increasing integration of all societies into an international capitalist economy produced effects within affluent societies that used to be associated with the Third World: increasing poverty and economic disparity, the creation of slums and processes of ghettoization, soaring rates of

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unemployment, among others (Stavrianos 1981: 23-27). Stavrianos does not in any way suggest a levelling of the playing field (albeit in negative terms) between the First and Third Worlds via neoliberalism. Rather he is pointing to the global effects of neoliberalism and the way they re-structured the geography of inequality and oppression.

Global South thus incorporates not only spaces that used to be referred to before as Third World, but also spaces in the North that are characterized by exploitation, oppression and neocolonial relations, such as indigenous and black communities (and immigrant communities) in Western societies; and vice versa, some spaces that used to be part of the Third World now inhabit an ambiguous political and economic space because of rapid processes of modernization and integration into the global economy. Let's think, for instance, of places such as Hong Kong, Singapore, Taiwan, South Korea (the so-called Asian tigers), the countries part of the Gulf Cooperation Council (Saudi Arabia, UAE, Qatar, Kuwait, Oman, and Bahrain), which are geographically positioned in the 'South,' though economically (and even politically) occupy spaces in the North. And there are, of course, liminal spaces: countries in Southeast Europe and the Balkans, where some of them have been politically integrated into the European Union (and thus given partial access to political and economic structures of the North). However, through their economic structures and even in socio-cultural terms, they are very much part of the Global South. The liminality of these spaces has become glaringly apparent with the recent Covid-19 crisis, when, in the midst of a general lockdown across the EU, agricultural workers were flown in from Romania into Germany and the UK to meet labour shortage demands for food supply chains threatened by the lockdown. Not only is the health of these workers imperiled, but their working conditions have been so appalling that some workers went on strike protesting lack of wages and degrading living arrangements.

The example above illustrates deep ambiguities and contradictions behind the idea of the Global South, whereby spaces from South/Third World are integrated into institutional arrangements in and by the North, which benefit primarily the North, and the political and economic elites in the South. One such example is NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement), a free trade agreement between the US, Canada, and Mexico, which took effect in January 1994. The agreement had as its goal the elimination of trade barriers between the three countries, and the increase of investment among them. On January 1, 1994, on the same day that the NAFTA agreement took effect, the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) declared war to the Mexican state. The Zapatista rebellion is made up primarily of poor indigenous peasants from Chiapas, in southern Mexico, whose already precarious livelihoods were devastated by the NAFTA agreement. Their struggles, their unique political philosophy and forms of organization, and their persistence in the face of tremendous odds stacked against them have attracted global attention: numerous groups, social movements, activists, academics, artists and journalists both from the North and the South have reached out in solidarity with the Zapatistas over the last three decades.

This example illustrates another layer of the term 'Global South:' on the one hand, there is the new geography of neoliberalism with its global capillaries of exploitation and dehumanization; on the other hand, there is also the Global South as 'a concatenation of protests against the theft of the commons, against the theft of human dignity and rights, against the undermining of democratic institutions' (Prashad 2012: 9). The protests that have recently exploded throughout the Global South in late 2019 in Chile, Iraq, Ecuador, Bolivia, Algeria, Iran, Lebanon have been chained mobilizations against the depredations of neoliberal capitalism and its local instantiations.

The question that lies at the core of debates around the terms Third World and Global South is the following: what (if anything) connects the Third World project to the Global South? While the rise of emerging economies (the BRICS: Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) has been hailed by some as signalling the end of the US' political and economic hegemony (and that of the West, more generally), and the arrival of multipolarity, others see little hope in this relatively recent development. Richard Pithouse (2018) argues that there is little that links the emancipatory potential of the Third World project (as highlighted by the conferences in Bandung in 1955 and Havana in 1966) to the contemporary reality of the BRICS. Current political leadership of countries making up the BRICS is anything but emancipatory: Modi and Bolsonaro can be accurately described as fascists, Vladimir Putin runs a highly repressive and corrupt regime, while corruption is deeply embedded in Chinese and South African polities. Pithouse thus sees little hope for emancipation among political elites in the Global South; rather, he argues, recovering the emancipatory project of the Third World has to come from building popular and democratic grassroots movements throughout the Global South.

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If the protests that exploded throughout the Global South in late 2019 are to be taken seriously, then the assessment is accurate: we cannot recuperate the promise and potential of the Third World project from current political establishments in the Global South – they have morphed into local/regional conduits of neoliberal repression (there are a few notable exceptions here, such as Cuba). However, it is grassroots movements, both local and transnational, that have kept the legacy of the Third World project alive. Paradoxically, then, the term Global South signals both the turn to neoliberalism but also ‘a world of protest, a whirlwind of creative activity’ (Prashad 2012: 9).

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