

## Redefining the "Third World"

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The Third World countries of the 1970s shared the common features of underdevelopment, political instability and neocolonial stranglehold. Since then, its member-nations have marched to different levels of economic progress and state-building. Moreover, the demise of the Soviet camp or the so-called Second World has torn apart the three-worlds divide. It is argued that the line that distinguished the Third World from the First and Second Worlds has blurred, and the global market economy and the touted end of ideology are integrating nations into one world society.

So where do these developments leave bodies like the Third World Studies Center? Do we now have to change our name to catch up with the times? Our avid readers will remember that we've confronted this question in our 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 1997. Vol. 12:3 of *Kasarinlan* documents the discussion among Filipino scholars in the University for or against the concept and, correspondingly, our Center's renaming. Names like "Global Studies Center" and "Center for Social Sciences Research" have cropped up, the latter having to do with the fact that we are under the College of Social Sciences and Philosophy of the University.

Three years hence, we're still wearing the same label. To use a metaphor that is quite antithetical to a Third Worldly standpoint, we're just like no-nonsense Levi's loyalists who haven't shifted to Guess, Jag, Giordano or some other new jeans on the block. The reasons to stay the way we're called are many, one largely having to do precisely with what brand names are all about — name-recall. Brand names also carry connotations or images as to the quality or nature of the product. To our minds, "Third World" connotes that critical edge, which today's sexy

labels like “Global Studies” or the too bland, too harmless name like “Social Science Research” don’t inspire.

Thanks to efforts of past TWSC Directors Randy David, Alex Magno and Maris Diokno and their company of deputies, research associates, administrative staff and local and international fellows, the TWSC has earned a niche in a global and local network of critical thinkers in search of alternatives to the status quo. If a party (okay, not a rally) is any indication, a reunion organized by lifetime TWSC friend Jojo Abinales in January 2000 drew in more than a hundred guests who as activists, students or teachers in the past or present, continue to share that sharpness in thinking about the way things are or shouldn’t be.

My proposal therefore is not to drop the label but to keep the dominant threads of the term that continue to be relevant. To do so, we must go back to the original signification of the term in the 1950s before it got trapped in the geopolitics of the Cold War, or embroiled in the leftist discourse of the day. The “Third World” then meant simply the common people (as against the lords): they who have been rendered poor, marginalized and powerless by local and global structures. We can see that the original idea was slanted toward the socio-economic nature of things, rather than the political-ideological to which many associated the term by the 1970s. This is not to say that latter slant that gave birth to the Non-Aligned Movement did not serve a purpose in its time. But it is what makes the term so dated, so time- and framework-bound. On the other hand, who will quarrel with the fact that socio-economic inequities persist and must be put squarely on today’s agenda that goes by the name of globalization.

This approach sort of collapses the “Third World” with what the notion of the “South” (in the North-South divide) represents.

The second step is to transcend the level of the state (as in “Third World countries”) or of continents (Latin America, Asia, Africa) as the units of analysis, and to use the term more liberally to apply as well

to relations among units horizontally and vertically. Thus we can refer to rich and poor divides within and across countries as Third World communities in the First World, or First World communities in the Third World, and easily get our message across. Disengaging from the term's geographic boundaries, we can likewise talk about literature with a Third World perspective rather than prose and poetry from Third World countries or writers, although the latter may still be appropriate in a good number of cases. We can also easily talk about issues of Third World women without necessarily referring to citizenship in particular countries.

The third measure is not to put much stress on the numeric significance of the term. This will address the qualms of those who think that the notion must presuppose a First and Second World. We can instead move to expand the meaning of the "Third" to generate the notion of the search for alternatives, for a "third way," so to speak. Such a search for alternatives can easily be associated with broadly shared "Third World aspirations," namely, freedom, justice, (sustainable/human) development, and self-defined identities.

The "third way" should also be seen in the plural, as a sort of list of possibilities, many of which have yet to be imagined. Likewise, it need not presuppose a defined first and second way though certainly the first and second can refer to the past and the present. The third can thus evoke a sense of the (desired) future.

True, these (self-serving) manipulations are actually arguments to make the term more symbolic than concrete. That is, rather than a cohesively defined concept describing a clearly inscribed phenomenon, it could serve to conjure that certain predisposition to the study of a continuing past, and the broad ideals of that era that continue to be unrealized. Which is what we're doing really, when we say we dare "new thinkers to CHALLENGE conventions, INNOVATE old ideas and RECONSTRUCT alternatives for an era begging for answers to old and new questions." And when we open Y2K with an issue entitled "Economies in Flux" and devote a big section discussing a potentially turn-off topic,

the Communist Manifesto; and follow this up with an issue on “Indigenous Peoples” and “Sexuality and Gender.”

This said, we proudly enter the next century fairly comfortable with our name and standing solidly on a foundation of hard work and an unflinching objective to continue discerning the cutting edge in societal discourse, by whatever name it goes. ❁