Third World: A Definition

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Coined at the end of the Second World War, the term "third world" has since then been used to denote a complex of intersections That makes it possible to allude to a single vaguely-defined phenomenon. At times used for the most diverse purposes and meanings, and yet also rejected for ideological and scientific reasons, the coinage expresses a category of nations with considerable differences. The common thread though appears to be the intent to group peoples of colonial origin or those who, having lived a history of colonialism, were burdened with the new forms of colonialism and dependence. New developments in the global order, however, seemed to have contributed to the deterioration and relative disuse of the expression. Wit a revival of the center-periphery discourse and the North-South dichotomy, the usage of the term continues, albeit this time with fewer ideological discriminations and more vagueness.

This is a coinage burdened with the most diverse uses and definitions and, by the same token, rejected for both ideological and scientific reasons. At times, its usage is expressly clarified. At others, it is adopted for lack of a better term, or from more habit and facility of communication in academic and political circles.

It was coined at the end of World War II and since then has been polisemous and multidimensional. It seems to carry a complex of intersections that makes it possible to allude to a single vaguely defined phenomenon.

Its earliest connotation occurred in the political world as the result of the Yalta Conference (1945) and agreements between the "West" or "free" or "capitalist" world and the "socialist states," to delimit their respective areas of influence. The idea that, besides those two blocs, there was a third became explicit in 1955 at the Bandung conference attended mainly by Asian and some African and Latin American nations. It seemed evident at that conference that the struggle between the two blocs and between capitalism and socialism had been joined by a third

for independence and against colonialism, or against the intervention of the great powers in the internal affairs of states, or their territories. Those struggles were joined by others, for equality among nations and for peaceful coexistence. China's presence, the Soviet Union's and Western great powers' absence lent a special definition to the polities of the conference. The presence of countries with extremely poor populations and the absence of Australia and New Zealand was another deliberate political definition. The absence of a large number of Latin American and African countries revealed the limits of the group and, indirectly, of the Third World which the conference strove to represent.

Another much used expression arose after Bandung – "non-alignment" – corresponding to a movement supported by proponents of the foregoing principles and of "the coexistence of nations and states, without regard to size, economic power, differences of political and social systems, race, religion, place or historical heritage and culture."[1] The principal countries of Asia, Africa and Latin America were joined by Yugoslavia as sole representative of Europe, and the socialist states led by the USSR. Its entry tended to underscore the movement's independence of the great powers and their struggles between "socialism" and "capitalism" or "democracy."

Differences between the various members of the "Third World" were always considerable: some were extremely poor and underdeveloped, others revealed great social stratification, with important middle and high income groups: their level of urbanization varied much; there were oil producers, and highly industrialized members and others with scarce energy and industrial resources. Many of them were mining and agricultural societies, some were beginning to have noteworthy industrialization policies, with native bourgeoisies which, supported by their States, were defending their markets with import substitution and protectionist policies against competition from the world more developed In matters of technology and productive forces. Variations in social and political systems were also great, many maintaining tributary relations of production and diverse forms of obligatory labor, and others in which wage labor, urbanization and broad middle and professional strata predominate. In the latter, policies of surplus accumulation and distribution, besides increasing and retaining a growing share of the same within national boundaries, generated the development of state capitalism.

Here, though the principal beneficiaries were the new magnates of the Third World, to consolidate a position and stabilize their states, they furthered policies of surplus distribution that earned them the support of large sectors of the organized working and urban population, and occasionally, even of peasant and agricultural groups. Nationalist, anti-imperialist and socialist ideologies were utilized to explain and legitimize the policies of these countries which, on the world scene, maintained various degrees of neutrality or alliance with the great capitalist or socialist powers.

The crisis of the model of accumulation and nationalist and popular blueprint became evident at the beginning of the sixties. Since then, criticism of the "nationalism" of the non-aligned countries also turned against the "Third World" concept.

The "Third World" concept always included the intention of grouping peoples of colonial origin or those who, having lived a history of colonialism, were burdened with the new forms of colonialism and dependence. From that point of view, the concept had been rejected or looked down upon by great power ideologues and scientists for whom colonialism was a phenomenon of the past and for whom dependence did not represent a factor in underdevelopment. For their part, from the outset, socialist bloc scientists and ideologues, mainly those led by the USSR, deemed the "Third World" concept to be unscientific and politically unacceptable. To them, "Third World" was an ideological expression at odds with "Scientific Materialism." Its members were accused of seeking a different and equidistant position from imperialism and socialism. From a political point of view, they were charged with "capitulating to imperialism and the monopolies" and of being against the essential struggle of the "socialist countries" with which "the peoples of the whole world" should be aligning themselves to resist the regressive and warlike tendencies of imperialism. These authors went so far as to flatly declare: "there is no Third World."[2]

Criticism of the "Third World" expression also came from thinkers of the New Left which developed during the seventies as a result of the Cuban revolution. Crises of governments of popular origin that had become populist regimes under which the influence of transnational corporations had been growing, provoked two kinds of phenomena and

complementary criticism. On the one hand, centers of domination and accumulation appeared in the "Third World" itself, which began to carry weight in the category, such as South Africa, Israel, Iran, Brazil and India[3] and on the other, growing links between national bourgeoisies and transnational corporations were joined by a process of integration and linkage with the "Third World's" "bureaucratic-authoritarian' armies and governments. All these alliances and links made the independent design seem illusory. On the other hard, the countries of the socialist bloc became the scene of accentuated contradictions between social and public, and private arid personal accumulation, as well as dogmatic and empty expressions of Marxism and Leninism in which rituals occupied all the space of reason, understanding and judgment. From the left, some authors not only denied the existence of the "Third World" but ever the existence of "two worlds." Andre Sunder Frank, among others, though with great emphasis, sustained the thesis that there is only one world and that it has been so "practically from the beginning of human history."[4]

With the coming of *perestroika* and the end of the USSR, Gorbachev not only abandoned interpretations based on accumulations, classes and imperialism but also maintained the idea of a single human struggle subordinating national and class interest, and with the cooperation of ancient blocs in the struggle for the universal good.[5] With the declaration of the end of the world revolutionary cycle and recognition of defeat of national liberation movements, even Fidel Castro said: "if a socialist country wishes to construct capitalism, we must respect its right to do so."[6] Soviet academicians went even further, declaring obsolete such categories as "class struggle" and forms of Marxist-Leninist research and action, which they had been the first to eliminate by making it the object of official adoration, and which they had officially buried so as to make the "market" the new object of veneration.

With the end of the "Second" and "Third Worlds," it seemed that only the "First" remained, which had been developing since the 16th century and since then had begun to dominate the world. The socialist states led by the USSR and those that had attempted their national development during the post-Second World War, from nationalist, socialist, communist and populist positions, for a while, achieved patterns of world and internal accumulation that differed from the natural tendencies of the market

economy. If similar changes had been achieved by the "social democracies" of the great powers, the communist and national movements or those of the new revolutions of the sixties managed to give special weight to the development of their countries productive forces, and to the redistribution of the surplus to provide a greater share to such sectors as intellectual and manual labor, the recovery and preservation of national territories and resources, formally in the hands of the great powers, and for the preservation of world peace and peaceful coexistence. Involved in extreme contradictions that provoked phenomena of corruption and enrichment, of authoritarianism and intellectual and ideological debasement, and that led to internal and international militaristic positions, their end contributed to the deterioration and relative disuse of the expression "Third World." Towards the end of the eighties, there was a revival of the categories of "central" and "peripheral" capitalism coined by Paul Baran and which Paul Prebisch pioneered at ECLA. Within Marxism, the category of peripheral capitalism was particularly developed by Samir Amin. In it were included the former countries of colonial origin in Africa, Asia and Latin America, today augmented by the USSR and the bloc of its allies in central and eastern Europe. As to China, Vietnam and Cuba, they seemed to be having trouble withstanding the globalizing process of a capitalism that in the eighties also increased the population of poor people, causing them to rise from two thirds to three quarters of humanity.

The expression "third world" continues to be used in the post-"Cold War" period, though with fewer ideological discriminations and more vagueness. Today, at the same time, those who prefer, talk about the countries of the "South" and of "North-South" relations, to consider, however indirectly, some of the problems formerly typified by the use of category of "Third World."

Notes

1 M. Gavrilovic, "The Vitality of Non-Alignment," Review *of International Affairs,* Vol. XXI No. 482, Belgrado, 1970.

2 Vid, *Breve Diccionado Politico.* Buenos Aires, 1970. (Basado en el Pequeño Diccionario Politico de I. V. Liojin y M.E. Struve, 1969).

3 James F. Petras, et al., *Class, State and Power in the Third World,* London, Zed, 1981, 39ss.

4 A. Gunder Frank. World System History Phase, *Journal of World History,* Vol. II No. 1, 1991.

5 Mijail Gorvachov, "Intervencion en la ONU," 7 de diciembre de 1988; "Intervencion en el Encuentro en la sede del CC del PCUS con personalidades de la ciencia y la cultura," enero de 1989.

6 Fidel Castro. Discurso en el XXXVI Aniversario del 26 de Julio, Granma, 1939.