

CELEBRATING THE THIRD WORLD

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Abstract:

The paper highlights the rise and fall of the third world. It sees third world as a project. The paper is an effort to celebrate the third world as an important development in the history of international politics. An effort has been made to dig deep into the trajectory through which the third world has evolved. The piece has some of the theoretical background as well.

Key Words:

Third world, cold war, first world, second world, Soviet Union, USA, NATO, developed, developing, project, colonialism, decolonization, non align movement, celebration, domination, oppressed and blocs.

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Introduction

In 1952, while the United States and the Soviet Union had finally seized the boundaries of their own 'blocs' security pacts of their own and entrenched mutual rivalries with hydrogen bombs, French intellectual Albert Sauvy wrote "This third world ignored, exploited, despised like the third estate also wants to be something". Much as Sauvy expressed the agony of the Third World, it is misplaced to consider Third World as a project driven out of desperation. Instead, Third World was a project of hope. The project of not just *wanting to be something* but more importantly, creating something that the world wants. The Third World was a celebration of a new world which was deemed possible. It is wrong to consider it as mourning for the impossibility of change.

Therefore, the term third world has its underpinnings in the cold war period as it arose during the cold war. In common parlance, the countries that remained non-aligned with either the first or the second world constituted the third world. North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) with the United States, Western European nations and their allies represent the First World while the Communist Bloc with the Soviet Union, China, Cuba, and their allies represent the Second World. This classification is broad and integral in nature and was based on social, political, cultural and economic parameters. The quantity of the third world is enormous as it includes many countries from the three continents of the world with similar colonial pasts. The continents include Asia, Africa and Latin America. It was also sometimes taken as identical with countries in the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM). The Third World has also been connected to the world economic division as "periphery" countries in the world system that is dominated by the "core" or developed countries of the world. The third world countries were past colonies. Having gained independence many of these countries, especially smaller ones, were faced with the challenges of nation and institution-building on their own for the first time. Due to this common background, many of these nations were "developing" in economic terms for most of the 20th century, and many still are. These were considered underdeveloped by the West based on a variety of characteristics. The features include -low economic development, low life expectancy, high rates of poverty and disease and so on. These nations became the targets for aid and support from governments, NGOs and individuals from wealthier nations.

Oppressive Structures of Power

To be true, the decolonizing nations – and the ones which were yet to decolonize – had felt the oppressive structures of power for far too long and if independence meant replacing one form of colonialism for another – neocolonialism, as Kwame Nkrumah called it – it meant nothing. Of all the things that these nations had been deprived of, there was one that they had in plenty – resistance. The colonized nations had experimented with forms of resistance that the independent nations of Western Europe and North America, suckled into the practices of balance of power, had been historically unable to do. Violence, as a form of rule and as a form of resistance, had been the primary form of engagement of the Western countries amongst themselves as well as with their colonies. While faced with an extreme violent onslaught that the colonized could not counter, for the lack of technology and resources, they experimented with various forms of resistance. Resistance, the colonized discovered for themselves, was not limited to an expression of violent rage but could be expressed in multifarious forms. Non-cooperation was resistance, burning foreign clothes was resistance, playing with colonizer's language was resistance, creating new music was resistance, dance was resistance. Resistance hence was not an act but an intention. Resistance was a mode of living, not an exceptional act. It was a process, not an event.

Given the West's fascination with violence as the only form of domination as well as resistance, it was not surprising that even peace was not peace, but Cold War. Peace maintained through the hypostatic force of violence was no peace at all and this is what the intellectual thrust of the Third World was. In any case, the only way peace could be maintained in the West was through externalization of violence to the non-west. The first era of relative peace in Europe was witnessed in the hundred years between the end of Napoleonic Wars and the First World War. It is no surprise that this peace was bought through excessive violence in the colonies. There is a reason why this era is also the golden age of colonialism. Cold War consequently could be no better. The Third World realized it.

Non-Alignment Angle

In the writings about non-alignment, most authors either are hagiographic or utterly dismissive. Non-alignment, the intellectual core of the Third World project, is either presented as a balancing strategy or an out-an-out idealistic project of bringing in world equality. Idealism is important, for every idea is idealistic at some level. But to say that all the countries which had recently

gained their respective independences from nations which were far more powerful were only dallying with fruitless idealism is to miss the historical reality. To not believe in change of oppressive structures would have been idealistic, not the other way around.

Third World As Project

Vijay Prashad's two volume study of the post-World War II third world 'project' has recently given us a expansive view of how 'Third World' was a political project and not a geographical connotation. It was not about non-Europeans coming together against Europe, for Europe has its own third world. Further, it was the supposed 'First World' within the Third World that eventually led to its uncelebrated demise. There is a reality transacting across these binaries that the Third World was not only seeking to challenge but reformulate our modes of knowing the world in a way in which the realities of the world are more experiential than constructed through power – both material and epistemic.

And this is the idea that makes the Third World not only relevant in the current times, but also all the more required. As boundaries between state and non-state, violence and non-violence, developed and developing, producers and consumers become fuzzy, there is a need for situating this fuzziness in theoretical landscapes. The perpetually mono-experiential West is historically incapable of that task. South African anthropologists have argued recently that today the North is moving towards the South and not the other way around. Consequently, finding itself at the privileged centre of this new historical reality, it is now the developing world – the Third World – that needs to become the producer of knowledge.

Conclusion

However, Third World is not merely about making alternative knowledge claims on reality. The Third World is also as much about creating alternative realities with plural foundations, be they economic, political or social. The Third World is plural and that is a reason for celebration. The First World having surrendered its plurality to the cold, calculated and homogenizing modernity is inherently incapable of envisioning a multiplicity of existence.

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