

WHAT I THOUGHT OF THE TERM GLOBAL SOUTH ... BEFORE I LEARNED HOW THE MAINSTREAM USES IT

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Before I started working at the *Global South Studies Center* I never thought much about the term Global South. Since that time, I have gradually come to realize that the term is riddled with contradictions, at least when used in the specific context that interests me most – migration studies.

In my naïve opinion, it seemed self-evident to me to use the most neutral term available to denominate the relationship between the dominant and the subaltern regions of the world. Global South, I believed, was shorthand for a complex, historically evolved configuration of global power relations. By talking about the Global South (and by implication, the North, or the other way around), one did not constantly have to stress that we currently experience a world order that grew out of European colonial domination over most of the world between, roughly, 1880 and 1914, and resulted in today's unequal distribution of economic and political power on a global scale. Likewise, it was obvious to me that this is not strictly a geographical expression (as, I would guess, most would nowadays agree).

The term seems neutral in the sense that it does not judge the whole world by the Northern paradigm of development, as did the (previous) term “developing countries”. At the same time it is inherently relational, as to talk about the South becomes meaningless without its conceptual counterpart. In that sense, I always saw very little difference between the North-South and the Core-Periphery relationships (as long as those you talked to were familiar with world-systems theory). Another term I consider largely synonymous is *Trikont* (meaning, of course, Africa, Asia, and Latin America). It was coined after the 1966 Tricontinental Conference in Havana, and denotes those regions of the world affected in a similar manner through their shared history (and present-day situation) of (post)colonial domination. *Trikont* was the term in vogue when I started to become politicized in Germany in the early 1990s, and my anti-imperialist friends used it interchangeably with

“Periphery” (if talking among students) or “Third World” (when older folks – say, unionists – were around). And we used it a lot (debating about revolutionary movements, as you might guess). In my opinion, the three expressions Global South, Periphery, and *Trikont* do have substantially different connotations (Periphery relies heavily on dependency theory; *Trikont* is about oppressors and oppressed; Global South connotes less of both), but are rather synonymous to the extent that they denote a complex global configuration with a long history. And they do of course suffer from the same shortfall, as they lump together very diverse economic and political positions and countless ways of life into one overarching category. But this is part and parcel of all such catch-all terms, and not using them would leave us ill-equipped to have discussions about anything beyond the basic assessments of macro structures that most social scientists can agree on.

At least, that's what I thought before I came to the GSSC. Now I realize that the mainstream use of my beloved (critical, post-colonial, and, yes, almost anti-imperialist) term is a mere window dressing, disguising that in fact it substitutes “developing countries”. Under “mainstream use” I include official documents of the United Nations.

As I'm working on migration control in the Western world, I draw on UN data and look at their publications from time to time. The Migration Section, within the Population Division of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs, maintains the United Nations Global Migration Database, which contains an abundant set of statistics on international migration. With its huge dataset and the wide reach of its publications, the Population Division has a significant visibility, and influences the perception of global migration flows far beyond the direct context of the UN, and, if I may be forgiven for quoting Spider-Man, “With great power comes great responsibility”.

In its reports and other publications, the Population Division structures the information by major areas, regions and countries of the world. Let's take a look at two recent reports ([Population Facts, No. 2013/3 Rev.1, April 2014](http://www.un.org/en/development/desa/pd/datastore/population-factsheets/population-factsheets-no-2013-3-rev-1-april-2014), cited as Facts 2014); [International Migration Report 2013, ST/ESA/SER.A/346, December 2013](http://www.un.org/en/development/desa/pd/datastore/migration-international-migration-report-2013-st/esa/ser/a/346), cited as Report 2013). Both frequently draw on

the distinction between the global “North” and “South” – respectively the “developed” and “developing” regions of the world, stating, for instance: “Since 1990, South-North migration has been the main driver of global migration trends, but South-South migration remains the largest category” (Facts 2014, 1). While it is immediately convincing that “countries and areas are grouped geographically into six major areas” (Report 2013, vii) – hence it is easier to find them on a map – it is less clear why the total of all countries is divided into “developed” and “developing” regions (ibid.), also named “North” and “South” in the same documents.

This juxtaposition is made very prominent and runs through all of the presentations of the data in these publications (e.g. the whole first page of Report 2013). Yet nowhere do the publications comment upon the reasons for this distinction. The explanatory notes prominently and abundantly explain which country is put into which (sub)category, but do not explain why these categories are created and used at all. Therefore the question arises as to why these publications are primarily structured according to a North-South-divide.

At first glance, the reason seems to be completely arbitrary. One possible interpretation is that the terms North/South are simply reproducing the older classifications developed/developing, without evaluating their practical relevance for the issue at hand. But this is not even done by reference to empirical parameters (like the rightly criticized GDP or HDI), and ends up containing obvious contradictions. The classification that defines “all countries of Europe, Northern America, Australia/New Zealand and Japan” as “developed”, and the rest as “developing” regions classifies three out of the ten economically most powerful states as “developing countries” (China, rank 3; Brazil, rank 7; India, rank 10 by GNI, see <http://databank.worldbank.org/data/download/GNI.pdf>). Also, in this classification, Portugal would be classified as “developed”, and the United Arab Emirates as “developing”. “Yet the UAE bests Portugal on the Human Development Index, and far exceeds it in regard to per capita GDP” (www.geocurrents.info/economic-geography/the-developing-world-and-the-developing-world#ixzz3BU48CPuM). At the same time, the broad categories lump together

into the same category “developed” countries like Romania and Albania (HDI rank of 56 and 70) – because they are in Europe – and put Singapore (HDI of 9), South Korea (15) and Israel (19) into the same category “developing” along with Afghanistan and Haiti. I simply don’t understand why these publications are not even using empirically valid classifications (i.e. the Human Development Index that is promoted by the UN, in combination with the latest World Bank data). Anyone who knows how to use an Excel spreadsheet could sort the data accordingly with a few mouse clicks.

Now, leaving aside the precise content of the categories used, my main issue is with the reasons for their application to data about global migration. When I thought longer about it, the juxtaposition of developed/North and developing/South even seemed counterintuitive to me, as the regions represented by the two categories (North and South) are of such different size and quality that any comparison is logically unfeasible. To give an example, the fact that “South-South migration is as common as South-North migration” (Facts 2014), given in absolute numbers, is next to meaningless, because it is not related to the (very unequal) size of the population in the respective areas.

I cannot help but wonder what the practical relevance of this juxtaposition is for analyzing migration on a global scale, because at first glance it seems to be arbitrary to match migration flows to the broad categories of ‘developed/developing’ countries. Unfortunately, the Population Division are silent about their underlying assumptions, and did not answer a query I sent in August 2014.

What I learned from my study of the UN publications was that outside my cozy ivory tower, not everybody agrees with me on what North and South mean. In the real world, it seems, one can get away with classifying whatever one wants as “developing”, and package it appealingly with the hip label Global South. This means that I can either surrender, and not use this term anymore, or continue to use it while remaining aware that it must be accompanied by a string of explanations. Neither alternative is appealing to me.

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