

GLOBAL SOUTH

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In hindsight, the appearance of the term Global South was a significant marker of the transition in global political economy and geopolitics that has led to the contemporary situation. The term – or at least the “South” component of it – was popularized by the Brandt Commission reports published in 1980 and 1983, both of which bore “North-South” in their titles.³ Over the following decades, “global” was attached to the “South” to form the contemporary compound term. The predicate is indicative of the discourse of globalization that was on the emergence in the 1990s. The United Nations Development Program initiative of 2003, “Forging a Global South”, underlined the significance of the term and the new conceptualization of global relations it represented.⁴

The Brandt Commission was established in 1977 by then head of the World Bank, Robert McNamara of Vietnam War fame, who had reinvented himself – from the official in charge of the military conduct of the war in Vietnam to compassionate patron of the Third World as head of the World Bank (note the parallel to Paul Wolfowitz, who made a similar transition three decades later from the manager of another disastrous war – in Iraq – to the World Bank). Chaired by former Berlin mayor and German Chancellor Willy Brandt, a Social Democrat with Green affinities, the commission perceived an impending economic and environmental global crisis on the horizon, and saw the development of the South as one crucial way to avert catastrophe for humankind.

The Brandt reports anticipated the end of the Cold War by asserting the primacy of North-South economic disparities over the East-West political divide that had set the world of capital-

ism against the world of socialism. It called for cooperation between advanced capitalist and socialist states in the development of the South. The South in this formulation was a stand-in for the “Third World”, a term that had been coined three decades earlier by the French scholar Alfred Sauvy to distinguish the formerly colonized and presently neo-colonized societies of Asia, Africa and Latin America from the modernized “first” world of capitalism and the modernizing “second” world of socialism. By the 1960s, “Third World” would become a central political slogan for the radical left. The term in its origins had suggested that societies of the Third World, embarking on the long path to modernity, had one of two paths to follow, the capitalist or the socialist. Even as socialist and capitalist (formerly colonialist) states vied for influence in the “Third World”, there was a lingering assumption in mainstream Euro/American scholarship, ultimately to be vindicated, that the socialist path itself was something of a temporary deviation. Modernization discourse assigned to capitalism the ultimate teleological task of bringing history to an end.⁵ Nevertheless, given the close association of capitalism with imperialism, the socialist example exerted significant influence on the national liberation movements that the Third World idea spawned. The developmental failure of “Third World” alternatives was evident by the 1970s. The term Global South, seemingly politically neutral, proposed to incorporate these societies in the developmental project of capitalism, already named “globalization” in one of the early uses of that term, which would not acquire popularity until the 1990s.⁶

The changing usages of the term Global South and the alternative agendas different uses imply offer clues to both continuities and discontinuities over the last half century in the global positioning of the “South”, as well as in the ideological and political role assigned to it in global geopolitics. The use of the term is explained by

³ Independent Commission on International Development Issues (The Brandt Commission, after its Chair), *North-South: A Programme for Survival* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1980), and, *Common Crisis North-South: Cooperation for World Recovery* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1983).

⁴ United Nations Development Programme, “Forging a Global South,” United Nations Day for South-South Cooperation, 19 December 2004. The Global South program reconceptualized and reorganized the UN Conference on Technical Cooperation that went back to 1948 in its origins.

⁵ The classic discussion of the various implications of the Third World idea is to be found in, Carl Pletsch’s “*The Three Worlds, or the Division of Social Scientific Labor, circa 1950-1975*,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 23 (October 1981): 565-590. More recent discussions may be found in the special issue of *Third World Quarterly*, “*After the Third World?*” (ed. by Mark T. Berger), 25.1 (2004).

⁶ *A Programme for Survival* called for “a globalization of policies”, p. 13.

some geographically: that with two exceptions – Australia and New Zealand – the developed countries of the world lie to the North of the developing, undeveloped or least-developed ones. While the term was no doubt not intended by its coiners to be taken in a literal physical geographical sense, it nevertheless seems worth pointing out that, like all geographical designations for ideological and political spaces and projects (globalization comes to mind readily), its geography is much more complicated than the term suggests, and is subject to change over time, so that the “South” of the contemporary world may be significantly different in its composition and territorial spread than the “South” of the early 1970s, or the colonial “South” of the immediate post-World War period. The Inuit are practically at the North Pole, while some formerly colonial or neocolonial urban centers of the South are a match, in activity and appearance, for metropolitan cities at the headquarters of Capital.

With all the good intentions of the formulators that are evident in the Reports, the course development took in the Global South would be dictated by changes in its global context. The publication of the first Brandt Commission report in 1981 coincided with the beginnings of the so-called Reagan/Thatcher revolution, the appearance of East/Southeast Asian capitalisms as competitors of the “North”, and the receding of socialism, beginning with the People’s Republic of China in the late 1970s. The Brandt Commission’s global neo-Keynesianism was stillborn in its rapid replacement in the course of the 1980s by Neoliberal economic policies enforced by the US-dominated World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. The transformation found expression in the late 1980s in the so-called Washington Consensus, a term that was coined with reference to US policies in Latin America, but quickly came to be associated with the shift from governmental intervention in the economy to marketization that characterized the discourse of globalization, which itself acquired prominence in the 1990s. The South had no choice but to seek development in the global capitalist economy. This also signified an important shift in the content of development – away from an earlier emphasis on development as national development (or the development of the whole nation). It is quite evident in hindsight that under contemporary conditions national

economic development no longer means the development of the whole nation, but rather only of those sectors of the economy and population that can participate successfully in the global economy, usually in urban networks that are components of a global network society.

The uneven development of the Global South since the term was coined has rendered the geography of the term even more complicated – to the point where it may have become an obstacle to understanding the contemporary global situation. Some of the societies covered by the term – such as the People’s Republic of China, India, Brazil, Turkey – have benefited from globalization to become more assertive in global relations – with the PRC aspiring to world leadership and hegemony. These days South-South relations are quite likely to be relations of exploitation reminiscent of colonialism. Internally, too, development under the regime of neoliberal globalization has created inequalities within individual nations. The same tendencies toward economic (and, therefore, political) oligarchy in the developed capitalist world are visible also in the “Global South”. Major urban centers in developing societies increasingly serve as nodes in the global networks of capital, distanced from their hinterlands by the concentration of wealth and power. Regional inequalities are accompanied by sharpening class differences in societies across the globe as wealth is accumulated in ever fewer sectors of society. The result is economic, political and cultural division and fragmentation, a far cry from the vision of equality between and within nations, with economies serving national development and integration, that inspired societies of the Global South in the aftermath of decolonization after World War II, when “Third World” suggested the possibility of viable alternatives both to capitalism and “actually existing socialism”. The term may still serve to delineate the developed from the developing world, but the line dividing the North from the South presently runs right through the north, the south, and across both.

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