Global South: Predicament and Promise

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ABSTRACT

This essay explores possibilities for the establishment of a new global order, in which the Global South may play a central part. It traces the emergence of the concept historically, with special attention to its antecedents in the popular term of the 1960s and 1970s, “Third World.” It suggests that while the “Third World” is no longer a viable concept geopolitically or as political project, it may still provide an inspiration for similar projects presently that may render the global South into a force in the reconfiguration of global relations. A number of powerful societies that have reason to align with the global South—China, India, Brazil and South Africa—may be particularly important in forging a global South. The essay examines in some depth the relationship to the Global South of one such society, the People's Republic of China.

I will discuss briefly below the term, “Global South”: its historical associations, the intellectual, ideological and political projects it suggests, and what reading we place on it that will best contribute to the realization of those projects. This will also clarify my vision of what the present journal could accomplish: to serve as a forum that will focus on issues of the South, while also encouraging participation from others more difficult to place geographically. Alliances that cut across developmental maps may be an urgent requirement of the times. I hope that “global South” as idea points to one form of alternative global alliance, and this journal serves as a means to that end.

THE GLOBAL SOUTH: THE THIRD WORLD

The term “global South”—or at least the “South” component of it—goes back to the 1970s, and is entangled in its implications with other terms that post-World War II modernization discourse and revolutionary movements gener-
ated to describe societies that seemed to face difficulties in achieving the economic and political goals of either capitalist or socialist modernity. It was largely equivalent to, but not identical with, the popular designation for such societies in the 1950s and 1960s (“Third World”) to which it bore a contradictory relationship.\(^1\) It was popularized by the so-called Brandt Commission reports published in 1980 and 1983, both of which bore “North-South” in their titles. The reports advocated large infusions of capital from the North to the South to enable their modernization.\(^2\) I am not certain when “global” was attached to the “South” to form the contemporary compound term; the predicate suggests some relationship to the discourse of globalization that was on the emergence in the 1990s. The United Nations Development Program initiative of 2003, “Forging a Global South,” has played an important part in drawing attention to the concept, as has interactivity among societies of the “South” establishing their own initiatives in pursuing developmental agenda.\(^3\)

The changing usages of the term, and the different agenda they 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 politics. The use of the term is explained by 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.\(^4\) While the term was no doubt not intended by its coiners to be taken in a literal physical geographical sense, it seems worth pointing out, nevertheless, 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 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 Inuits are practically on the North Pole, while some formerly colonial or neocolonial urban centers are a match in activity and appearance for metropolitan cities at the headquarters of Capital. The context, too, is different. The disappearance of the socialist alternative has left behind one hegemonic power, and one hegemonic ideology: neoliberalism. This situation has in many ways increased the burdens on the South, both in the problems it faces, and in the role it may play in the resolution of global problems. Both the problems of the “South,” and the political projects it suggests, are subject to variation over time in accordance with such internal/external, and material/ideological changes.

It is hardly necessary to elaborate that the term “Third World,” coined by Alfred Sauvy in 1952, and intended to distinguish the formerly colonized or neocolonized world from the modernizing worlds of capitalism and socialism, was to become by the 1960s 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. Implicit in it was a lingering assumption, ultimately to be fulfilled, that the socialist path itself was something of a temporary deviation, as modernization discourse assigned to capitalism the ultimate teleological task of bringing history to an end. 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.

But the Third World could also be conceived as a third path to modernity, and it was conceived as such by the societies of the South who participated in the Bandung Conference of 1955. This conception was of crucial relevance in the high value placed on Third World national liberation movements in both North and South as a way out of capitalism, doomed to fall with the end of colonialism and imperialism, without falling back on Stalinist socialism. 1968 was the year of the Third World. The Third World was by then not just an empirical term. It had come also to represent a revolutionary way out of the dilemmas presented by capitalism and actually-existing socialism. The South seemed poised at the edge of history.

Only a decade later, the situation seemed to have been transformed. The Brandt Commission was established in 1977 by then head of the World Bank, Robert McNamara of Vietnam Fame, who had re-invented himself from the official in charge of the military conduct of the war in Vietnam, to compassionate patron of the Third World (note similarities to Paul Wolfowitz at the present). Led by former Mayor of Berlin and German Chancellor Willy Brandt, a Social Democrat with Green inclinations, the commission perceived an impending economic and environmental global crisis on the horizon, and saw increased succor for the South as one crucial way to avert catastrophe for humankind. Within a decade, the “South” had turned from a possible savior of the world to an object of compassion that must be saved in order for the world to save itself. But the salvation now pointed to a different path than the one envisaged earlier with the liberationist impulses of world revolutionary movements. The publication of the Brandt Commission report in 1981 coincided with the beginnings of the Reagan/Thatcher revolution, the appearance of East/Southeast Asian capitalism as competitors to the “North,” and the receding of socialism, beginning with the People’s Republic of China in 1978. 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 U.S.-dominated World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. The transformation found expression ultimately in the so-called Washington consensus, a term coined in 1990 primarily with reference to U.S. policies in Latin America, but quickly came to be associated with the shift from
governmental aid to marketization that characterized the discourse of globalization, which itself acquired prominence in the 1990s. The South had 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 GLOBAL SOUTH: MEMORIES OF UNDERDEVELOPMENT

With the so-called globalization of the 1990s, the geographies of development have been reconfigured, calling into question not only the earlier Three Worlds idea, but the viability of the North/South distinction. Presently, the boundaries between the two are crisscrossed by networks of various kinds, relocating some parts of the South in the North, and vice versa. I am referring here not only to migrations across various boundaries of developmental success, but also to the creation of “native” pockets of poverty that are very much reminiscent of the South; without implying that the countries of the North and South suffer from the same deprivations and maladies. But territorially based differences are being overdetermined by emerging social inequalities—not just ethnic, but class and gender—that render the South a site of internal contradictions and conflicts, much the same as in the North but without some of the institutional restraints available.

What is important is that the solutions to the South’s problems must be part of global solutions—or at least regional solutions that transcend national boundaries. The UNDP project of 2003, “Forging a Global South,” is described as a “new paradigm of development.” The project is intended for the South to take command of its own future. Rather than await succor from the North, the countries of the South most cooperate with one another in fostering the overall development of the South: “south-south cooperation,” as the framers put it. “South–south cooperation,” described as a “decentralized cooperation,” is to be open to cooperation with countries outside of the South in what is termed “triangular cooperation” (United 4). What may be most significant here is the suggestion that the South must invent itself, and acquire visibility on the global scene in an assertion of its autonomy, partial autonomy, at least. It has some kinship with the idea of the “Third World” in its self-assertion. On the other hand, it is also the product of a quite different historical situation. The disappearance of the “Second World,” the world of socialism, has left behind a world that is nearly unipolar in military might, but otherwise
quite chaotic in its economic, political and cultural alignments. The South as it invents itself must also invent economic alternatives to neoliberalism if it is to achieve autonomous development within the confines of global capitalism, which is about the only option available on the horizon presently. Can this be achieved?

Such an achievement may be dependent, ironically, upon the return to some of the economic and political alignments of an earlier, “Three Worlds,” spatialization of the world. At the same time, it must account for the entanglements of the South and the North in one another, and the reconfiguration of spatial relationships through the globalization and the transnationalization of capital, and the institutions it calls forth. The philosophy of self-help is splendid, but it requires for its practice autonomy of nation and region, which in turn calls for a global institutional arrangement that respects and supports such autonomy, rather than subject it to the subversions of supposedly universal neoliberal market principles. It is also important to remember that the obstacles to autonomous development do not lie outside alone, as there are groups and classes in most societies of the South who are already parts of a transnational economy and its social formations, and have a stake in its perpetuation and expansion.

Nevertheless, there are certain affinities between these societies in terms of mutual recognition of historical experiences with colonialism and neocolonialism, a history not yet ended of economic, political and social (racial) marginalization, and, in some cases, memories of cooperation or common cause in struggles for global justice in past liberation movements. The UNDP Global South project has coincided with renewed activity in which societies of the “South” have taken the initiative, from the World Social Forum to the formation in 2003 of the Group of 20, representing powerful Southern societies such as China, India and Brazil. The South, in cooperation with radical forces in the North, has played an increasingly visible part in global political activity from protests against the WTO to protests against the War in Iraq.6

Not to be too romantic about Third World affinities, there are also issues of global power at stake. There are societies poised between the North and the South by virtue of developmental success—China and India being prime examples presently—that can play a leadership role in the South, and also benefit from the role in the enhancement of their own power on the global scene. For the same reason, there is some evidence already that from the People’s Republic of China to India, Brazil and South Africa, societies that might qualify for leadership in the global South are already engaged in a competition for power among themselves (as had been the case earlier with Bandung), undermining the promise of unity as well as inviting manipulation from the outside, most importantly by the United States which has been openly hostile to any signs of Southern resurgence.7
A further predicament is that these societies themselves are under pressure from neoliberal globalization, of which they are beneficiaries, and suffer some of the consequences of uneven development that is a structural characteristic of global capitalism—unequal development on a territorial basis, as well as severe social inequalities on the emergence. There are internal as well as external forces pushing these societies in the direction of greater globalization, and assimilation into neoliberal capitalism, and forces that favor autonomous development with greater equity and social justice (and less environmental degradation, we might add); which of these forces may prevail is an open question, and is dependent to a large extent on the international environment as well.

THE PEOPLE’S REPUBLIC OF CHINA AND THE GLOBAL SOUTH

I would like to illustrate some of the possibilities and predicaments of a Southern alliance in the perspective of the People’s Republic of China, an increasingly important player in world economy and politics. Over the last two years, there has been frequent reference to a “Beijing consensus” as an alternative to the neoliberal Washington Consensus. The idea of a Beijing consensus was floated by former Time magazine foreign news editor, and present Goldman Sachs employee in Beijing, Joshua Cooper Ramo. It is quite simple in its basics in arguing for a “Chinese model of development” that has registered significant success in the global economy, and done so without sacrificing national autonomy and goals. Where the Chinese “model of development” is concerned, Ramo’s discussion of the Beijing consensus is naively ideological, and full of contradictions. Nevertheless, Chinese writers, while critical of Ramo’s particular approach, have found in the notion an expression of their own dispositions. And the stress on the possibility of autonomous development within the framework of global capitalism has caught the attention of many in the Third World.

The possibilities as well as the challenges facing the Global South are apparent in the contradictions that are visible in the case of the People’s Republic of China, which has managed to achieve a high level of development within the neoliberal global economy without completely abandoning its autonomy, its commitment to develop nationally, and ideas of equity and justice that are the legacies of half a century of socialist experimentation. There has been some talk of a Chinese Model of Development, but that may be the most illusory aspect of Chinese claims to leadership. All the problems created by development need to be solved before convincing claims may be made on the viability of such a model; and the Chinese path of development may be impossible to emulate elsewhere, as it was shaped not only by a particular revolutionary legacy, but also by placement within a regional node of global capitalism, as well...
as in relationship to significant Overseas Chinese capital, that created the conditions for the flow of global capital to Chinese development.

But there is nevertheless something quite important in the Chinese commitment to autonomy, equity and social justice—if only at the level of an ideology of global relationships that counters a hegemonic neoliberal order that would place the fate of humanity in the marketization of society itself, and the privatization of its lifelines. And it is here that what has been called a Beijing consensus may point to possibilities for global reorganization led by a Southern covenant, in cooperation with all the forces of the North born of the “southernization” of the North itself. It is not so much a model that Chinese developments provides as a paradigm, in which the apparent defense of self-determination goes hand-in-hand with successful globalization, as Chinese commentators would have it. It may be here that a Beijing consensus offers a genuine alternative to the Washington Consensus, not in the economy or social policy, but in reshaping the global political environment that is the context for economic development. The People’s Republic of China has opened up to the globe economically but, much to the chagrin of groups ranging from Reaganite conservatives to labor leaders in the United States, has managed nevertheless to preserve its political autonomy and sovereignty. A recent study by a Chinese American scholar, Colleen Lye, observes perceptively that over the century and a half of relations between the United States and China, it has been an American dream to convert China to capitalism, which turns into a nightmare the moment the conversion begins to show signs of success. This, of course, has been part of a larger global project. Globalization itself has presupposed the conversion of the globe into capitalism under the aegis of the advanced capitalist societies, most importantly of North America and Europe. On the other hand, globalization has derived much of its substantial reality from the sprouting of localized capitalisms that unifies the globe, but also divides it in new ways. Contrary to ideologues of globalization, the craving for autonomy and self-determination has not disappeared from the globe; on the contrary, it may have acquired renewed force from the proliferation of global institutions and communication, complicating notions of autonomy and self-determination by adding new demands to already existing ones.

The search for autonomy and self-determination has taken the form not only of maintaining controls over the economy internally, but also by a multilateralist approach to global relationships that contrasts sharply with the increasingly unilateralist direction United States policy has taken over the last two decades. The most important aspect of the Beijing Consensus may be an approach to global relationships that seeks in multilateral global relationships a new global order which is founded on economic relationships but also recognizes political and cultural difference, which recognizes differences in regional and national practices within a common global framework, and which is
founded not upon homogenizing universalisms that inevitably lead to hegemonism, but a simultaneous recognition of commonality and difference. Deng Xiaoping’s reforms beginning in the 1980s gave priority to economic intercourse over political correctness.

In the pursuit of these goals over the last two decades, the P.R.C. has emerged as a counter to U.S. economic and political hegemony, without directly challenging the United States. What is also remarkable is the willingness of transnational corporations, including U.S. transnational corporations, to go along with Beijing’s policies internally and externally—which may indicate political opportunism, or a genuine suspicion of neoliberalism as a paradigm not only of the economy but of society and politics as well. Leaders of global capitalism, from George Soros to Bill Gates, have voiced such concerns, and the promotion of a Chinese model of development (Beijing consensus) by an employee of Goldman and Sachs in Beijing may well be read as an emerging consensus among global corporate capital to go along with Beijing. World-systems analysts from Andre Gundar Frank to Giovanni Arrighi and Immanuel Wallerstein have argued for some time now that the center of the capitalist world-system is in the process of relocating to East Asia. The realignments around Beijing may be further evidence of such a shift, so long as we keep in mind the spatial reconfiguration of East Asia due to the phenomena I referred to above—most importantly the new spatial and social divisions that make it difficult to speak of East Asia in terms of national surfaces or socially and culturally homogenized national spaces. East Asia, in other words, is being reconfigured as it plays an increasingly central part in the global economy. The P.R.C. seeks to integrate itself not only with East, but also with Southeast Asia and the Pacific. There has been talk also of China, India and Brazil as forming a new Third World triangle to counter the economic and political domination of Europe and North America. These new networks are not just economic and political, but also geopolitical, pointing to a new kind of competition over global resources.

Beijing may be emerging as a new center of gravity of the Third World, or the Global South, a Bandung for the age of global capitalism when the issue is no longer overcoming colonialism or finding a “third way of development,” but the inclusion of the voices of the formerly colonized and marginalized in a world that already has been shaped by a colonial modernity to which there is no alternative in sight—the world of global modernity. It is also important, however, that the forging of a new global order around the global South not be sacrificed to considerations of national power, of which there are already signs in the competition between China, India, Brazil, and, possibly, South Africa. “De-centralized cooperation” may well offer one way of overcoming the urge to power. A “global consensus” may be preferable, to this end, to any consensus named after nation or national capital.\(^{31}\)
Whatever may be the name we give it, a global consensus against a hegemonic Empire has far-reaching implications not only for international relations but also for the solution of problems internal to societies. The global domination of neoliberalism rules out the formation of autonomous social and political spaces that are necessary for the pursuit of social justice and welfare within nations. Where it is not possible to establish any kind of a clear demarcation between the inside and the outside, an alternative global order premised upon the recognition of local particularities and needs may be the indispensable condition of such a pursuit. It is no longer possible to entertain hopes for or confidence in “delinking” from global capitalism as a means to this end. The search for answers to global problems must itself be global in its vision. In the particular case of the People’s Republic of China, “the opening and reform” (gaige kaifang) of the last three decades is irreversible. There is every indication that the P.R.C. may well end up in a complete assimilation to global capitalism. But there are other possibilities as well, and their realization may well depend on the ability of the postsocialist regime to pursue a reconfiguration of global forces to counter the universalistic pretensions of neoliberalism. A century of revolutionary socialist search for autonomy, bolstered by recent economic success, qualifies the P.R.C. eminently to provide leadership in the formation of an alternative global order. That global order may be the indispensable condition, in turn, of development that responds to the particular internal needs of different societies.

GLOBAL SOLUTIONS TO GLOBAL PROBLEMS

Over the last two years, the notion of a “Beijing consensus” seems to have acquired a life of its own. The search for an alternative to neoliberal globalization no doubt has played an important part in provoking interest in the implications of the term, especially in the Third World, but in the formerly Second World as well. Dissatisfaction with the “shock therapies” of neoliberalism came to a head with the Asian crisis of 1997. Successful economic development of the P.R.C. has made it into the envy of the developing world; writings from abroad frequently focus on the ability of the Beijing government in pursuing its own agenda as a major reason for that success. The Brazilian leader Lula DaSilva expressed his admiration for the P.R.C. for its ability to pursue an integrated development, and to globalize without giving up its autonomy and sovereignty. Beijing in turn has intensified its efforts to engage in multilateral agreements that have contributed to its positive image around the world and, with it, the prestige of a notion of Beijing consensus.

The appeal of the Beijing consensus no doubt has also benefited from the decline of U.S. prestige globally with the unscrupulous use of American power under the current administration, intensifying concerns with the need to
find an alternative model of global development to that represented by the U. S. Whether or not a “Chinese model” can serve such a purpose is another question. “Localization” is an important aspect of China’s participation in the global economy (as it was of the Chinese Revolution earlier). In a global perspective, localization, needless to say, points to the importance of tailoring development policies to local needs, which of necessity are different from one location to another. In this sense, I think it is important to draw a distinction between a “Beijing consensus,” which points to an alternative global organization, and a “Chinese model,” which answers to the particular needs of Chinese society. The distinction is similar to that of an earlier day, when the “Chinese model” referred to a particularly Chinese path of socialist development, without repudiating the global necessity of socialism.

It is all the more important, given the urgency of these questions, to keep a perspective on the contemporary situation. The undeniable success of the development of the Chinese economy should not blind us to the problems created by the very same success, which ironically are in those very areas that attract the admiration of outsiders. The P.R.C. economy is by no means integrated but suffers from severe uneven development in both spatial and social terms. Levels of pollution have reached such severity that they have become an additional cause of public suffering and disturbance. While there has indeed been a remarkable growth of wealth in certain sectors of the population, and an explosion in the size of the urban middle class, the majority of the population has experienced a decline in basic welfare.

For all its ability to keep neoliberalism at arm’s length, the successes of the Chinese economy are attributable in the end to successful manipulation of a neoliberal global economy, as are the problems it has produced. The Wal-Martization of society would seem to be gathering in strength, there is every evidence of the spread of a consumer culture not only in major urban areas but in the countryside as well, and the P.R.C. in terms of its structuring of power internally increasingly approximates global class divisions, with its own fraction of a transnational capitalist class.13 Not good signs!

It is equally important to remember, in considering these problems, that those aspects of development that outside observers find attractive are not products of this neoliberal economy but legacies of the socialist revolution. Integration of the national economy, autonomous development, political and economic sovereignty, social equality are all themes that are as old as the history of the Chinese revolution which in the end found expression in the socialist revolution. One author has observed recently that a crucial element in the success of the post-1978 reforms was that they built “on the achievements of the earlier regime.” Post-1978 developments are used these days to discredit the policies of revolutionary socialism of an earlier period. It is also possible to state not only that those policies laid the economic, social and political foun-
dation for China's autonomous path into globalization, but also that it is the same foundation, now in the process of crumbling, that secured the minimum social welfare which enabled participation in a neoliberal global economy.

How these developments will end up remains to be seen, but it seems at this crucial juncture that some reconsideration of the now abandoned socialist policies of social welfare and integration is very much in order. Socialism is, after all, attention to public policy against the vagaries of the market or of innovation, and the ends of development (in contrast to development as an end) are very much a matter of public policy. The global South has its roots in earlier Third World visions of liberation, and those visions still have an important role to play in restoring human ends to development, so long as they do not become blinders against recognition of a changed world situation.

Notes

1. See "Third."
2. See Independent North and Crisis, respectively.
3. See United. The “Global South” program was a reconceptualization and reorganization of the UN Conference on Technical Cooperation that went back to 1948 in its origins.
4. See "Third."
5. The classic discussion of the various implications of the Third World idea appears in Pletsch. More recent discussions, with reference to the present, appear in Berger.
6. See Young.
7. See Devraj. Brazilian claims to leadership are discussed in Hernandez.
8. See Ramo.
9. See Lye.
10. See Harris.
11. "Global Covenant" already has found its way into the titles of two books, by David Held and Robert H. Jackson, respectively. It seems important to me to underline the importance in any such term of the global South, the clear majority of human kind that is marginalized under the regime of neoliberal globalization. The PRC is likely to be crucial to any such search because it is uniquely situated between the second and third worlds of the former “Three Worlds,” as analyzed by Mao Zedong in the 1970s, or the European North and the South of the present. See Held, Jackson.
12. See Lula. I am grateful to my colleagues Ana Candela and Carlos Aguirre for their help with translating this article.
13. For further discussion of these tendencies, see Dirlik “Markets.”
14. See Singh. See also Dirlik Marxism.
Works Cited


