

The Global South as a Political Project

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LUCIANA BALLESTRIN, JUL 3 2020

The term “South”[1] appeared in the international vocabulary in 1980[2] and in the following decade its association with the predicate “Global” happened due to the end of the Cold War and the Globalization discourse and the dynamics of enlargement (Dirlik, 2007). Because of the reference regarding poor and developing countries in contrast to the richest and developed ones, the “Global South” is the heir of the outdated “Third World” concept[3]. In both denominations, the classification of the world considers the stage of economic development towards modernity as the main parameter. The understanding of such modernity and development is strongly associated with the idea of progress or evolution. However, as well as the idea of the Third World, the Global South cannot be seen simply as a set of non-developed and non-modern countries localized in the ex-colonial zones of the globe. There are many different meanings for both categories, which should not be understood exclusively in a geographical or territorial sense. The two terms were capable of projecting a subaltern geopolitical identity, presenting different ways to belonging in the international system.

In this view, the Global South “functions as more than a metaphor for underdevelopment” (Dados; Connell, 2012, p. 13). The twentieth-century anticolonial movement, the Bandung Conference (1955), the Non-Aligned Movement (1961), and Cuba’s Tricontinentalism (1966) are some examples on which Global South has its origins and influences. For this, the concept can work as

a symbolic designation meant to capture the semblance of cohesion that emerged when the former colonial entities engaged in political projects of decolonization and moved towards the realization of a postcolonial international (Grovgoui, 2011, p. 176).

Thus, the term alludes to the history of imperialism and colonialism, as well as to the violence suffered by its different members.

The members of the Global South are not necessarily nation-states and they can be “defined in transnational social terms” (Hurrell, 2013, p. 206) or even “a set of practices, attitudes, and relations” (Grovgoui, 2011, p. 177). Such understandings about what is the “Global South” allows thinking of it as a category without a central command, defined scale, or exclusive form. Therefore, it is important to recognize the great variety of actors, discourses, institutions, and movements that take part in this category. The Global South is not a monolithic, cohesive, coherent, and homogenous entity characterized by the absence of conflicts and interests. For both analytical and political purposes, it is important to not simplify or romanticize the idea of the Global South. The existence of “south in the north” and “north in the south” complexifies the (re)production of (neo)colonial and (neo)imperial power, especially in the current context of increasing global inequalities. Thus, the rejection of everything regarding the “Global North” itself can be a dangerous position and its complexity needs to be taken into consideration in the same way as the “Global South”.

The simplification, reduction, and essentialization elapse from the mobilization of binary categories such as center/periphery, west/east, or first/third world. Politically, the self-recognition of one’s own subaltern position can be operated as “strategic essentialism”, according to Gayatri Spivak (Morton, 2004). Thus, the Global South imaginary is identified with the history of the peripheries, the east/“rest” and the third world. The reaffirmation of subalternity does not allow forgetting the colonial difference until the present. It is possible to verify a subaltern position regarding

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the international system, the economic dynamics, the cultural expressions, the academic structures, the thinking systems. The Eurocentric character of modern imperial power created resistance against Western domination (HURRELL, 2013).

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the “Global South” was the most powerful force to present and claim future alternatives to neoliberal globalization, as well as the continuity of struggles on decolonization. From the civil society’s perspective, “another globalization is possible” was the slogan of the World Social Forum; the struggles against racism have reverberated in different institutions; the environment and indigenous people’s rights protection became part of the international agenda; experiences of decolonization have promoted the “new Latin-American constitutionalism” and other kinds of contestation around the world, such as demands on decolonizing academic curriculum or historical monuments and museums. The Southern Theories and Epistemologies research agenda have gathered debates about academic dependency, the geopolitics of knowledge, and other logic of knowing[4] (Connell, 2007; Sousa Santos & Meneses, 2010; Alatas, 2003; Mignolo, 2002). All those examples show and reinforce the understanding of the Global South as a

multifaceted movement that underscores the need for a postcolonial international community of interest that advances the objectives of equality, freedom, and mutuality in the form of a new ethos of power and subjectivity through foreign policy, international solidarity, and responsibility to self and others in an international order free of the institutional legacies of colonialism (Grovgoui, 2011, p. 176).

From a governmental and intergovernmental point of view, the first decade of the twentieth-first century has beard witness to the emergence of powers like Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa, that together formed the BRICS. Latin America had experienced the so-called Left Turn or Pink Tide, following the democratic elections of leftist leaderships in different countries. In a larger context, South-South cooperation was stimulated within the new paradigm of development proposed by the United Nations Development Program “Forging a Global South”, published in 2003 (Dirlik, 2007). According to Gray and Gills (2016, p. 557), “South-South cooperation (SSC) has been a key organizing concept and a set of practices in pursuit of these historical changes through a vision of mutual benefit and solidarity among the disadvantaged of the world system”. The limits of this new arrangement are clear:

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) (Dirlik, 2007, p. 15).

Because of constraints and the reinforcement of the global capitalist neoliberal agenda, the South-South cooperation has a limited potential to *delinking* or decolonizing the post-colonial international order. This is very different from the revolutionary role performed by the Third World in making a decolonial inflection in the bipolar Cold War dynamics. If “the solutions to the South’s problems must be part of global solutions” as Dirlik (2007, p. 15) pointed, the absence of alternatives outside the market-oriented competition and the neoliberal ideology offers reduced possibilities to construct new paths to development, to question what kind of the development or even why development. Furthermore, the different structural constraints of the post-colonial international order – including the state-centered form – raise suspicion to the more critical or radical voices, which are seeing the “Global South” as a product made by the “Global North”.

The Global South is a political project permanently disputed by progressive and regressive forces in the multipolar context. Nowadays, the Global South has several challenges to maintain itself as an indispensable political project towards a fairer and equal world. The pandemic, the decrease of democratic regimes, and the consequences of the “Anthropocene” are radically modifying the current global context. The reconstruction of the idea of humankind, the continuity of the decolonization projects, the retrieval of democracy, and the rescue of politics from the neoliberal rationality will be urgent tasks of the Global South along with the South of the Global North.

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Notes

[1] Previously, the term “South” had already been used in different situations to describe a marginalized position. In 1943, the illustration of the inverted South America map made by the Uruguayan artist Joaquín Torres García represented the will to rethinking such subaltern imaginary with their propose “*our north is the south*”.

[2] The reference is to the report entitled “North-South: a Program for Survival” written by the Independent Commission on International Development Issues, constituted in 1977 and chaired by Willy Brandt.

[3] Alfred Sauvy coined the term in 1952, alluding to a part of the world which was not identified with the capitalist neither communist proposition towards modernity – despite of the influence of the socialist bloc on different liberation movements. The Third World tradition is associated with the leftist agenda in the search for autonomy, independence, and self-determination.

[4] This research agenda had its origins in the previous discussion about third world sociology, dependence theory, liberation philosophy, post-colonial feminism and many others.

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