

## **The Third World: no longer a player in international relations?**

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It has often been said that the Third World has ceased to exist, that it has become too unwieldy as an entity to be relevant and that the cleavages emerging out of bipolarity belie the claim of an immense non-aligned South. And yet, one has not been able to muster the resolution to discard the concept completely. Even though it is a hodgepodge of ideas, it still remains in some ways convenient. The end of the Cold War was not the last straw: common characteristics such as a low per capita income, an economic fabric generally dependant on economic centres of the developed world for growth, the dominant role of tradition in societies having problems managing their transition to modernity, a political system more often than not insufficiently democratic still provided a conceptual framework to study the conditions for economic development in the context of globalisation. It also allowed for the re-appraisal of their role in the new fragmented world order in which new peripheries and margins *a priori* insignificant for hegemonic States were being redefined and conflicts and human tragedies re-enacted.

Third World and socialist illusions have died with the failure of utopias and the lost decade of the eighties. With the collapse of nation-states (Ethiopia, Somalia, Liberia in the late eighties) and the bankruptcy of meaningful experiments (Algerian industrialisation, Latin American models, African socialism) a triumphant neo liberal ideology urged economically backward countries to ensure democratisation was accompanied by radical economic reform so they could stand to gain from globalisation.

In spite of the upheaval, the Third World continued to present a seemingly amorphous yet present whole, informal yet not passive, and relied on the alter-globalising conscience of some sections of public opinion in the North to assert its anti-establishment position. Firstly, democratisation of societies, they felt, must find its extension in the international community, once again taking up the age old debate on North-South relations which have remained unequal in spite of the preponderance of the countries of the South in international institutions. Then, the widespread malfunctioning of the global economy and the negative externalities it caused for regions ill-prepared gave rise to a violent critique of the strategies advocated by international financial institutions – at the behest of the United States – this representing perhaps

the key to a novel international alliance among non governmental players and a heterogeneous group of States of diverse sizes and interests. Have these trends firmed up over the last few years? Can the Third World still make its voice heard? Can it influence the international agenda by relying on potential coalitions? Nothing is less certain.

*The growth of the world economy is dividing the Third World camp and re-centring its agenda*

### Globalisation is weakening the chances of a new negotiated universal international economic order

Most countries in the international community subscribed to the demand for a New International Economic Order (1974), one which aimed at balancing North South relations mainly with a view to enable a better redistribution of wealth. As all utopias which are not bound by any commitment, it remained at the conceptual level: the transposition of legal equality of sovereign States on the economic domain. Key structures and words have not been discarded: the Non Aligned Movement, the Group of 77<sup>i</sup> and the UNCTAD carry on their struggle, even though their voice is becoming fainter.

The Third World survived even if growth had already changed perceptions in the early nineties. Countries with intermediate incomes and emerging economies had caused cracks in the whole. Some countries seemed to be coming out of the crisis: they carried greater weight on international markets and competed with developed countries sometimes even on political issues (collective security: the role of China); however, large sections of their populations remained poor and were kept away from modernity, weakening political and social structures and questioning the idea of development taking place. Yet, emerging economies were characterised by their ability to seize the opportunities globalisation offered and their acceptance of common rules: opening of markets, liberalisation, privatisation, strategic investment in education and infrastructure. These countries while experiencing sustainable growth continued to share the dissident discourse of the South. But their credibility diminished to the extent that their comparative advantages and their integration into the economic network made them part of another logic. Their companies became multinational and shared the global strategy of firms: Infosys (India), CRVD (Brazil), Cnooc (Chinese oil company), for example<sup>ii</sup>. Their discourse changed: rather than questioning the liberal framework, their demands were related to the conditions of integration and the adherence of their partners to the rules

of liberalism. A stable environment, a good level of education and nodal transport highways seemed henceforth to be essential prerequisites. The newly industrialised countries were no longer members of the South in the nineties and a new group seemed to be taking the same route: Brazil, Mexico, Argentina, Turkey, Thailand, China, Malaysia, India, etc.

The Washington consensus, which structured the strategies advocated by several specialists (Anglo-Saxon) and international financial institutions (IFI), was perhaps not a dogma, the term used to describe and violently criticize it<sup>iii</sup>. Local political considerations, ruling class interests and the nature of client regimes have often posed formidable obstacles to developmental policies. Even so, the critique and reality of failures continue to shape thinking in this field and a new consensus is being drawn up. It has begun to acquire shape over the last few years within a new IFI action framework: though deregulation is the main IFI recommendation, it is henceforth acknowledged that other factors also come into play: corporate culture, rule of law, the country's security and stability. Now the latter requires greater social cohesion, thereby less inequality and public expenditure absolutely necessary to satisfy the basic needs of the most underprivileged segments. Growth is increasingly based on the human factor and to take advantage of low cost labour is not enough: India is already experiencing a shortfall in the number of qualified wage earners. In more general terms, the rule of law has become a *sine qua non* to reconcile diverging interests and avoid explosive social tension which has come to characterise the failure of the model (Indonesia, Argentina, Venezuela, etc.); and provide a legal framework capable of inspiring confidence in economic network partners. IFI have integrated to a certain extent this dimension, especially since 1999-2000 (report *Fighting against poverty*, World Bank, 2000). The emerging powers are themselves aware of the risk: China realises that rural unrest or labour conflicts could weaken her growth in the long run<sup>iv</sup>.

Certainly, many Third World States are rejecting the new consensus, if only because it takes up, as a corollary to good governance, the theme of democratisation, often perceived as an intrusion or an insult for many countries seeking to achieve a difficult internal equilibrium. Nonetheless, the new agenda of the international financial institutions and their distancing themselves from the arrogant hegemony of the eighties and nineties tend to nullify a mobilising and convenient enemy.

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