



The ‘Third World’s’ Anticolonial Worldmaking Project

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ABSTRACT

While the term “Third World” is a problematic anachronism due to its derogatory connotations, it is used throughout this essay to bring to life a concept envisioned by Vijay Prashad – the Third World Project. In the middle of the twentieth century, newly independent Third World nations displayed an unprecedented degree of agency and unity as they undertook an anticolonial worldmaking project. I will discuss how the creation of the Third World bloc empowered their anticolonial agenda, namely through the Bandung Conference and the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM). This geopolitical alliance became a formidable force within the international political arena and would blunt a new phenomenon, neocolonialism, as these nations partook in South–South economic, cultural, and defensive cooperation. Lastly, this essay will touch on the transformation of the UN into an institutional vehicle for political independence and economic reform.

Introduction

In a 1952 publication of *L'Observateur*, a French anticolonial weekly paper, Alfred Sauvy coined the term “Third World” to describe underdeveloped nations outside of the Cold War blocs known as the First and Second Worlds (Sauvy 1952, 81). Although Sauvy stressed that the power struggle between Western capitalist nations and Eastern Communist nations threatened the countries outside of this bipolar divide, he ended the article on an optimistic note, remarking that “after all, this Third World, ignored, exploited, despised like the Third Estate, also wants to be something” (Sauvy 1952, 83). As history unfolded, Sauvy foreshadowed the revolutionary spirit of the Third World, as these nations undertook a worldmaking project against colonialism, racialism, and nuclearism. While all three of these elements were foundational pillars of the Third World Project, this essay will focus on the advancement of anticolonialism. Fused together by their struggles for independence, nations of the Third World crafted their own history and project, as they united together against colonialism in all of its manifestations. By establishing a Third World geopolitical bloc through the 1955 Bandung Conference and the creation of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) in 1961, these countries delegitimized colonial governments’ rule and established political weight and power within the international political arena (Wagner 2012, 275-277). This unprecedented geopolitical alliance blunted neocolonialism, as it strengthened defensive, economic, and cultural cooperation within the Global South. By joining the United Nations (UN), the Third

World further undermined colonialism, utilizing this intergovernmental organization as an institutional vehicle for political independence and global economic reform. This was facilitated through the creation of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) in 1964 and the adoption of the New International Economic Order (NIEO) in 1974 (Fajardo 2022, 204-206).

The 1955 Bandung Conference

The Third World geopolitical bloc was created when twenty-nine African and Asian nations gathered to collectively denounce colonialism at the Bandung Conference in 1955 (Wagner 2012, 276). This first major Afro-Asian conference inaugurated the Third World Project. Despite the apparent divisions based on borders, political alignments, and social differences, the twenty-nine nations were “united by a common detestation of colonialism in whatever form it appear[ed],” as Sukarno, Indonesia’s first president, declared in his opening speech at the conference (Sukarno 1955). Even though they represented 54 per cent of the world’s population, these countries recognized that their efforts to dismantle the West’s colonial empires must be a united, not isolated effort (Nawrocki 2022). In the conference’s Final Communiqué, the Bandung twenty-nine harmoniously denounced colonialism and pledged their support for the political self-determination of dependent Third World nations (Kahin 1956, 84-85). This conference and Communiqué, a political manifesto of sorts, delegitimized colonial government’s rule, as it united the Third World as a geopolitical power bloc against Europe’s colonial em-

pires. This unprecedented alliance profoundly transformed the calculus of international politics. While colonial empires were condemned, liberation movements were empowered. This is particularly evident in Sub-Saharan Africa, where in 1960 alone, seventeen nations achieved independence (Meriwether 1960, 181). The Third World's efforts to dismantle colonialism were no longer disjointed, but rather united under the geopolitical alliance established at Bandung, signaling that colonial governments were no longer uncontested on the world stage.

A Bulwark Against Neocolonialism

In addition to empowering their voice within international political discourse, this geopolitical bloc served as a bulwark against neocolonialism. In July of 1956, Yugoslavia entered the Third World bloc, as the new “Big Three” – Egypt, India, and Yugoslavia – convened on the island of Birjuni, Yugoslavia to form a nonsuperpower alliance. This meeting affirmed their commitment to the Bandung principles and laid the foundations for the creation of the NAM (Životić and Jovan Čavoški 2016, 85). This newborn tripartite alliance debuted on the world stage when Gamal Abdel Nasser, the president of Egypt, nationalized the Suez Canal – a prized Anglo-French possession – in July 1956 (Prashad 2017, 100). After Britain and France, alongside Israel, invaded Egypt to reclaim this key component of their colonial empire, Yugoslavia and India quickly pledged support for their new ally. Jawaharlal Nehru and Josip Tito adamantly denounced this invasion at the UN as a neocolonial effort to prolong the

economic exploitation of Egypt (Životić and Čavoški 2016, 88). The Suez Crisis highlighted the effective bulwark established against neocolonialism, with the Third World bloc acting as a multilateral support system. The bulwark also included military support once Cuba joined the Third World bloc, as this small Latin American nation provided massive amounts of arms and troops to the People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA), an anticolonial guerrilla force in Angola (Gleijeses 2002, 160).

Economic and Cultural Cooperation

Neocolonialism was suppressed through the cultural and economic cooperation that this alliance of Third World nations cultivated. Rather than opening with a condemnation of colonialism, Bandung's Final Communiqué called for economic cooperation, commencing the “long-standing call for South–South cooperation” (Wagner 2012, 276). The Bandung twenty-nine committed to partake in transnational technical assistance, joint ventures, primary commodity trade agreements, trade fairs, and the exchange of information and ideas of mutual interest (Kahin 1956, 76-78). While neocolonialism was largely an economic phenomenon, it also had cultural dimensions, as the West transformed its cultural suppression of the Third World after colonial governments were uprooted in the post-war era. The First World's mainstream scholarly and media discourse was the principal vehicle of this cultural suppression, as it perpetuated derogatory cultural notions of decolonized nations. For instance, Paul Ehrlich's 1968 publication of *The Population Bomb* argued that overpopulation,

rather than colonialism, was the primary cause of hunger in the Global South, homogenizing the Third World population as savages, ahistorical, profligate, and worthless (Prashad 2017, 8). However, the Third World bloc blunted this neocolonial cultural suppression, as these newly independent nations participated in cultural cooperation. The Bandung Conference enriched and empowered the national cultures of the Third World, as the participating nations agreed to engage in the “acquisition of knowledge of each other’s country” and “mutual cultural exchanges” (Kahin 1956, 80).

The Non-Aligned Movement and Armed Liberation

The creation of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) in 1961 further strengthened the Third World geopolitical bloc, not just as an adjunct to the First or Second Worlds, but as a formalized intergovernmental organization against colonialism and the Cold War conflict. As the two rival camps struggled for possession of the Third World during the Cold War, leaders Tito (Yugoslavia), Nasser (Egypt), Nehru (India), Sukarno (Indonesia), and Kwame Nkrumah (Ghana) offered an alternative to this bipolar world. The leaders hosted twenty-one nations from Asia, Africa, Europe and Latin America at a summit in Belgrade in 1961, marking the beginning of this historic movement (Prashad 2017, 100). While these countries did not act conjointly on all issues, the NAM strengthened their geopolitical unity and power, propelling their unified rejection of colonialism into international political discourse. While the NAM advocated for peaceful co-existence, it did not

display complete neutrality given its support for armed liberation movements on the African continent. For example, in 1964, the NAM offered “every type of support to the freedom fighters” part of the MPLA, the African Party for the Independence of Guinea and Cape Verde (PAIGC), and the Liberation Front of Mozambique (FRELIMO) – three liberation movements that took up arms against Portuguese colonial regimes in their respective nations (Prashad 2017, 103). In the eyes of these non-aligned nations, the armed struggle against colonialism was not a violation of peaceful co-existence, but rather a necessity for it. The second NAM Conference in Cairo in 1964 reaffirmed this ethos, as they deemed wars of national liberation to be the colonized world’s principal vehicle to fulfill their “natural aspirations” (Prashad 2017, 110). The 1966 Tricontinental Conference in Havana would further empower armed militancy across the Third World, particularly in Vietnam, as the 513 delegates from the 83 groups in attendance pledged solidarity to the Vietnamese people following presentations by Nguyen Van Tien of the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam and Tran Danh Tuyen of the government of North Vietnam (Prashad 2017, 108). The creation of the NAM cemented the Third World as a formidable force within international politics, and thus delegitimized colonial rule throughout the Global South, as their politically empowered advocations for armed liberation experienced a phase of oratorical inflation.

Disrupting the UN’s Status-Quo

While the UN was founded in 1945 to pro-

mote human rights, world peace, and social progress, its membership demographic and political agenda in the immediate post-war years suggested otherwise. The internal pressure from the few founding Third World members to extend membership, coupled with the Bandung Communiqué's demand for universal membership, contributed to the democratization of this intergovernmental organization. Throughout the 1950s and into the 1970s, newly independent Third World nations were welcomed into the UN. In fact, by 1970, membership reached 127, a stark contrast from the initial 51 founding members in 1945.¹ Newly independent nations' acceptances into the UN legitimized their independence on a global scale, signalling that a large portion of the international community believed that the West's colonial empires were coming to an end. Moreover, the Third World further destabilized colonial governments by utilizing the UN as a platform to broadcast and denounce previously hidden colonial atrocities to the world. This denunciation of the First World's remaining colonies reached its apogee in international political discourse three years after the Belgrade summit in 1961, as the G-77 – a group of seventy-seven nations – was established to act as the unified mouthpiece of the Third World's anticolonial agenda at the UN (Wagner 2012, 278). While the UN admitted a large number of Third World countries and became a platform for anticolonialism, it remained largely apolitical on decolonization in terms of the resolutions it adopted, as the majority of the

¹ United Nations, "Growth in United Nations membership," Accessed April 15, 2022. <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/growth-in-un-membership>

members of the Security Council – a governing body with veto power over the General Assembly – were dedicated to keeping their colonial empires intact (Prashad 2017, 102). Nevertheless, Third World member nations increasingly leveraged their growing representation and voting privileges in the General Assembly, eventually transforming the UN into an institutional instrument for political independence and justice. For instance, the General Assembly passed the landmark Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples in 1960 and established a subsequent Special Committee on Decolonization to monitor this declaration's imposition.² By leveraging their growing representation within the UN, the Third World carved out a greater space for their anticolonial sentiment within the international political arena and transformed this organization's political agenda.

Economic Agency Within The UN

This newly established amalgamation of nations within the UN would also serve as the Third World's principal defensive mechanism against neocolonialism, as this bloc would "be the bulwark against dollar imperialism and offer an alternative model for development," as remarked by Prashad (Prashad 2017, 41). The bloc leveraged their weight within the UN, paving the way for the establishment of the UNC-

² United Nations General Assembly, Resolution 1514 (XV), "Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples," Adopted December 14, 1960. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/declaration-granting-independence-colonial-countries-and-peoples>

TAD in 1964 and the subsequent UN adoption of the NIEO in 1974. The conference and resolution were the economic arms of the Third World Project, as they were catalysts in driving global economic reform amidst the West's neocolonial economic exploitation of Third World countries. As the first secretary general of the UNCTAD, Raúl Prebisch – an Argentinian economist – drew the Third World into the discussion for their own development, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the General Agreement on Trade and Tariffs – Western-dominated economic institutions and agreements – tried to keep them out (Prashad 2017, 70). In the eyes of many scholars, the adoption of the NIEO in 1974 was the high point of the Third World Project, as it legitimized the Third World's efforts to transform an unbalanced global system of trade and the division of labor between the raw-material producing nations of the Global South and the industrialized nations of the North (Fajardo 2022, 205).

Conclusion

Freed from the shackles of formal political colonialism, Third World nations undertook an ambitious anticolonial worldmaking project that delegitimized colonial governments and suppressed neocolonialism. The creation of a Third World geopolitical power bloc through the Bandung Conference and the establishment of the NAM transformed the calculus of international politics, as colonial governments became the targets of politically empowered denunciations in international political discourse. This newly established bloc also served

as a bulwark against neocolonialism, fostering defensive, economic, and cultural cooperation amongst its Third World members. By joining the UN, these newly independent nations transformed its political agenda and utilized it as a platform to propel condemnations of the remaining colonial governments onto the world stage. They also leveraged their growing membership to reconstruct this organization into an institutional vehicle against neocolonialism's economic exploitation of the Global South, namely through the creation of the UNCTAD and NIEO. This anticolonial worldmaking project highlighted the agency and capabilities of the Third World. Contrary to many claims at the forefront of First World scholarly discourse, the Third World was not a mere follower of and adjunct to the Global North, but was rather a leader in its own right.

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