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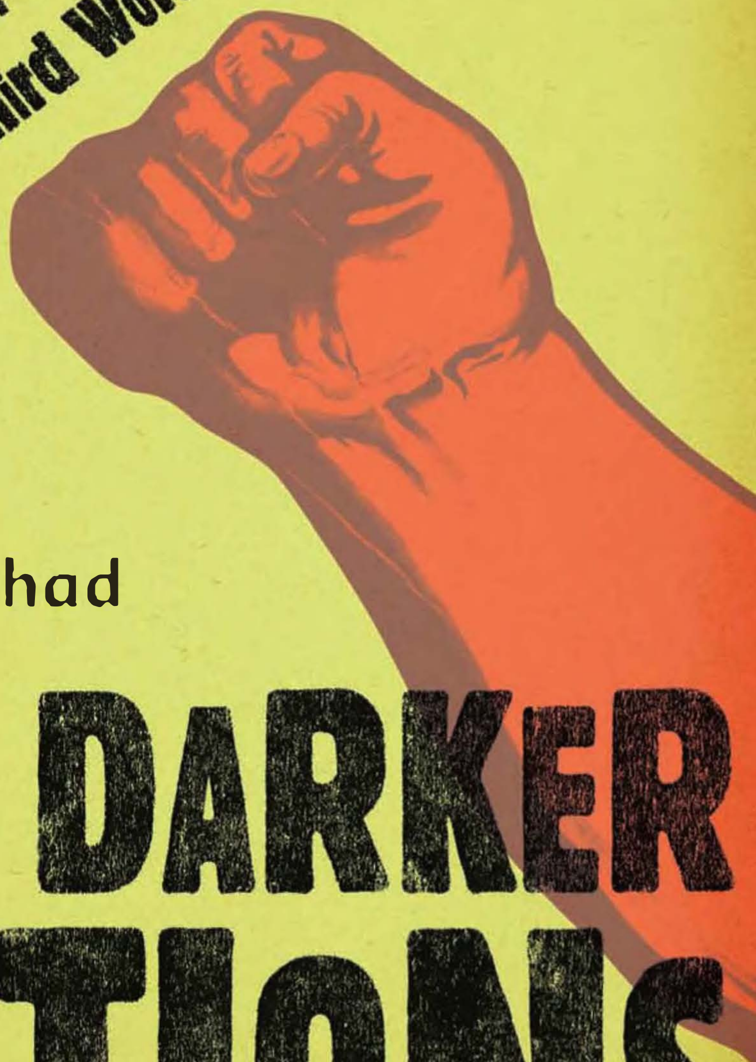
A People's History of the Third World



Vijay Prashad

# THE DARKER NATIONS

A NEW PRESS PEOPLE'S HISTORY | **Howard Zinn**, Series Editor

# INTRODUCTION

> The Third World today faces Europe like a colossal mass whose project should be to try to resolve the problems to which Europe has not been able to find the answers.
>
> —Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 1961[1]

The Third World was not a place. It was a project. During the seemingly interminable battles against colonialism, the peoples of Africa, Asia, and Latin America dreamed of a new world. They longed for dignity above all else, but also the basic necessities of life (land, peace, and freedom). They assembled their grievances and aspirations into various kinds of organizations, where their leadership then formulated a platform of demands. These leaders, whether India's Jawaharlal Nehru, Egypt's Gamal Abdel Nasser, Ghana's Kwame Nkrumah, or Cuba's Fidel Castro, met at a series of gatherings during the middle decades of the twentieth century. In Bandung (1955), Havana (1966), and elsewhere, these leaders crafted an ideology and a set of institutions to bear the hopes of their populations. The "Third World" comprised these hopes and the institutions produced to carry them forward.

From the rubble of World War II rose a bipolar Cold War that threatened the existence of humanity. Hair-triggers on nuclear weapons alongside heated debates about poverty, inequality, and freedom threatened even those who did not live under the U.S. or Soviet umbrellas. Both sides, as Nehru noted, pelted each other with arguments about peace. Almost unmolested by the devastation of the war, the United States used its advantages to rebuild the two sides of Eurasia and cage

Guinea-Bissau, September 1974: No Fist Is Big Enough to Hide the Sky. © ALAIN DEJEAN/SYGMA/CORBIS

in a battered Soviet Union. Phrases like "massive retaliation" and "brinkmanship" provided no comfort to the two-thirds of the world's people who had only recently won or were on the threshold of winning their independence from colonial rulers.

Thrown between these two major formations, the darker nations amassed as the Third World. Determined people struck out against colonialism to win their freedom. They demanded political equality on the world level. The main institution for this expression was the United Nations. From its inception in 1948, the United Nations played an enormous role for the bulk of the planet. Even if they did not earn permanent seats on the UN Security Council, the new states took advantage of the UN General Assembly to put forward their demands. The Afro-Asian meetings in Bandung and Cairo (1955 and 1961, respectively), the creation of the Non-Aligned Movement in Belgrade (1961), and the Tricontinental Conference in Havana rehearsed the major arguments within the Third World project so that they could take them in a concerted way to the main stage, the United Nations. In addition, the new states pushed the United Nations to create institutional platforms for their Third World agenda: the UN Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) was the most important of these institutions, but it was not the only one. Through these institutions, aspects other than political equality came to the fore: the Third World project included

a demand for the redistribution of the world's resources, a more dignified rate of return for the labor power of their people, and a shared acknowledgment of the heritage of science, technology, and culture.

In Bandung, the host Ahmed Sukarno offered this catechism for the Third World:

> Let us not be bitter about the past, but let us keep our eyes firmly on the future. Let us remember that no blessing of God is so sweet as life and liberty. Let us remember that the stature of all mankind is diminished so long as nations or parts of nations are still unfree. Let us remember that the highest purpose of man is the liberation of man from his bonds of fear, his bonds of poverty, the liberation of man from the physical, spiritual and intellectual bonds which have for long stunted the development of humanity's majority. And let us remember, Sisters and Brothers, that for the sake of all that, we Asians and Africans must be united.[2]

The idea of the Third World moved millions and created heroes. Some of these were political figures like the three titans (Nasser, Nehru, Sukarno), but also Vietnam's Nguyen Thi Binh and Ho Chi Minh, Algeria's Ben Bella, and South Africa's Nelson Mandela. The project also provided the elements of a new imagination for its cultural workers—people such as the poet Pablo Neruda, the singer Umm Kulthum, and the painter Sudjana Kerton. The horizon produced by the Third World enthused them, along with those who made history in their everyday lives. The Third World project united these discordant comrades.

The Third World project came with a built-in flaw. The fight against the colonial and imperial forces enforced a unity among various political parties and across social classes. Widely popular social movements and political formations won freedom for the new nations, and then took power. Once in power, the unity that had been preserved at all costs became a liability. The working class and the peasantry in many of these movements had acceded to an alliance with the landlords and emergent industrial elites. Once the new nation came into their hands, the people believed, the new state would promote a socialist program. What they got instead was a compromise ideology called Arab Socialism, African Socialism, Sarvodaya, or NASAKOM that combined the promise of equality with the maintenance of social hierarchy. Rather than provide the means to create an entirely new society, these regimes protected the elites among the old social classes while producing the elements of social welfare for the people. Once in power, the old social classes exerted

themselves, either through the offices of the military or the victorious people's party. In many places, the Communists were domesticated, outlawed, or massacred to maintain this discordant unity. In the first few decades of state construction, from the 1940s to the 1970s, consistent pressure from working people, the prestige of the national liberation party, and the planetary consensus over the use of the state to create demand constrained these dominant classes to some extent. They still took charge of the new states, but their desire for untrammeled profit was hampered by lingering patriotism or the type of political and economic regimes established by national liberation.

By the 1970s, the new nations were no longer new. Their failures were legion. Popular demands for land, bread, and peace had been ignored on behalf of the needs of the dominant classes. Internecine warfare, a failure to control the prices of primary commodities, an inability to overcome the suffocation of finance capital, and more led to a crisis in the budgets of much of the Third World. Borrowings from commercial banks could only come if the states agreed to "structural adjustment" packages from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank. The assassination of the Third World led to the desiccation of the capacity of the state to act on behalf of the population, an end to making the case for a new international economic order, and a disavowal of the goals of socialism. Dominant classes that had once been tethered to the Third World agenda now cut loose. They began to see themselves as elites, and not as part of a project—the patriotism of the bottom line overcame obligatory social solidarity. An upshot of this demise of the Third World agenda was the growth of forms of cultural nationalism in the darker nations. Atavisms of all kinds emerged to fill the space once taken up by various forms of socialism. Fundamentalist religion, race, and unreconstructed forms of class power emerged from under the wreckage of the Third World project.

The demise of the Third World has been catastrophic. People across the three continents continue to dream of something better, and many of them are organized into social movements or political parties. Their aspirations have a local voice. Beyond that, their hopes and dreams are unintelligible. During the middle decades of the twentieth century, the Third World agenda bore these beliefs from localities to national capitals and onward to the world stage. The institutions of the Third World amassed these ideas and nailed them to the doors of powerful buildings. The Third World project (the ideology and institutions) enabled the powerless to hold a dialogue with the powerful, and to try to hold them

accountable. Today, there is no such vehicle for local dreams. *The Darker Nations* is written to remind us of that immense labor and its importance.

The account is not exhaustive but illustrative. *The Darker Nations* makes a broad argument about the nature of the Third World political project, and the causes and consequences of its decline. The world was bettered by the attempt to articulate a Third World agenda. Now it is impoverished for the lack of that motion.

# CONCLUSION

Debt hangs heavy for the bulk of the planet. In 1970, when the Third World project was intact, the sixty states classified as "low-income" by the World Bank owed commercial lenders and international agencies $25 billion. Three decades later, the debt of these states ballooned to $523 billion. An impoverished conversation on debt yields no agenda to combat this fundamental ailment for the former Third World. These are not "poor" countries. Over the course of these three decades, the sixty states paid $550 billion in principle and interest on loans worth $540 billion. Yet they still owe $523 billion. The alchemy of international usury binds the darker nations.

At the 1986 NAM Summit in Harare, Zimbabwe, a group of leaders under the initiative of Malaysia's Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamed created the South Commission. They wanted a serious study of the political and economic problems of the NAM states, and some pointers for action. To chair the commission, NAM chose Tanzania's former president Julius Nyerere. Nyerere summarized the Third World project in five words: "growth and hope—then disillusionment." The hope of the anticolonial era was translated into an agenda, a project that the new states struggled to enact. It was unique in world history for the majority of the world to agree on the broad outlines of a project for the creation of justice on earth. But it did not last. External and internal pressures crippled the project. "That [Third World] hope has now vanished. For there was a gradual realization that such progress as was made in the first three decades after 1945 did not imply any fundamental change in the status or real development prospects of

The Brijuni Islands, Yugoslavia, July 1956: The Titans at Brijuni, enfolded by the sounds of Suez. COURTESY OF THE NEHRU MEMORIAL MUSEUM AND LIBRARY, NEW DELHI

Third World countries. Dependency was increasing rather than decreasing, poverty was persisting and the income gap between the Rich North and the Poor South was getting wider."[1] According to the World Bank, "In 1960 per capita GDP in the richest 20 countries was 18 times than in the poorest 20 countries. By 1995 this gap had widened to 37 times."[2] The divergence between the North and the South grew as the Third World fragmented. But even this spatial metaphor of the North and the South is insufficient; it ignores the mature class hierarchies that had grown within each of the countries in the South and the North.

The South Commission's report, released in 1990, argued that the adjustment strategies of the IMF-led globalization weakened the Third World as a political force. The UNCTAD, the G-77, NAM, and others faded into insignificance. One consequence of this demise was that no credible political force existed to champion a debt abolition or relief strategy for the planet. On the debt question, the report noted that "the vulnerability of individual developing countries vis-à-vis the North made it impossible for them to make an effective collective stand on the debt issue and to go beyond broad statements of policy."[3] The South had no control

over the North or even the ability to initiate matters of collective concern. The Third World, in other words, had been dissolved.

As the South Commission met and wrote its report, a series of crucial events transpired. In 1985, the Communist Party of the Soviet Union began a long transition toward economic liberalization (perestroika) and political openness (glasnost). Six years later, the party was overwhelmed and the USSR collapsed. Consequently the bipolar Cold War ended. While this major development occurred, the United States as the leader of the Atlantic powers began to exercise its long-held project of primacy over the planet. The invasion of Panama (1989) was a dress rehearsal for the new epoch. It was followed by the war on Iraq, the dismemberment of Yugoslavia, and other displays of aerial bombardment. The unchecked Atlantic alliance now used military power to reshape polities. An older doctrine of primacy remained the mantra in Washington, and its elites maneuvered the U.S. population into a well-laid trap. During the course of the Cold War, the U.S. government operated as the hub of a well-projected set of allied spokes that put pressure equally on the USSR and the Third World. With the effective demise of both, and with the maintenance of U.S. military power intact, the U.S. policymakers were drawn into a fallacy: that they should no longer pull back, but that they should drive a forward policy to reshape the world using U.S. military power in the interests of a transnational turbo elite. The U.S. government eagerly accepted the leadership of a global coalition of dominant classes (it used a combination of free markets or "soft power" and military force or "hard power" in different doses since 1989 onward). The U.S. defense and treasury departments went to work to ensure that resources continue to flow toward transnational corporations, and that the dollar remain the main hard currency.

The ruling classes in the darker nations no longer had any institutional incentive to respond to the grievances and aspirations of their populations. Sections among these elites are often more predisposed to the tics of the various stock indexes then they are to the demands of their populations. Mumbai's Dalal Street and the Dar es Salaam Stock Exchange thrive when their own citizens feel pain. And the higher the stock indexes, the better the bond rating for a country. In other words, the neoliberal strategy allows a state to better its competitive position if its population suffers more. Demands on the neoliberal state from social movements or political parties are met with repression, dismissal, or ideological hostility. Police firings against protesters are routine, but so is the statement that the opposition has no alternative to the neoliberal

one. But most important, the ruling classes also turned to more subtle ideological stratagems. The cultivation of cultural nationalism as the social cement in an otherwise-political wasteland is a cause and consequence of the collapse of the Third World. Racial and religious political organization is not prepared to confront capital along with its central role in the creation of planetary distress. Rather, religious and racial organization is now the social balm for hopelessness and helplessness. IMF-driven globalization undermines the possibility of egalitarianism. Racialism and religiosity ridicule equity on behalf of a traditional, mostly hierarchical order. Neither this globalization nor traditionalism is capable of being true to the dreams of freedom and the demands for equality that govern the souls of modern humans.

Distress produces its own contradictions. Grievances and anger manifest themselves in different ways, dependent on the kinds of traditions available in different countries. Where the Left has been obliterated, the festering anger at the growing inequality produced fiery hatred and violence as well as a kind of authoritarian populist nationalism. Attacks against minorities or else fantasies of an armed war against the United States and its allies grow in those regions (such as Sudan and Indonesia) that were once home to growing progressive movements. In other areas, such as Latin America, acronyms presumed dead resurfaced (MAS in Bolivia came back to win elections in 2006) and revolutionaries reappeared to articulate popular grievances in a different vocabulary (guerrillas in Venezuela are now in government). Social movements arose in the darker nations to challenge the neoliberal states with national liberation values: land movements, water movements, indigenous rights movements, and others have culminated in electoral victories or else in the imagination of alternatives to IMF-driven globalization. Many of these struggles draw on resilient ideological resources (such as Marxism, anarchism, and populism). Confident Communist parties, indigenous unions, and broader movement platforms are some of the organizations that have assembled the popular anxieties about global asymmetries. The unchecked growth of U.S. power has renewed the emotional attachment to national sovereignty, if not among elites, then certainly among those who have been disadvantaged by the collapse of the Second and Third World projects. The transformation in Latin America, the clogged feint in the Middle East, and the reorganization of alliances among China, Russia, and others has paused the juggernaut of U.S. power.

But in this renewal of energy, there is as yet little evidence of an alternative institutional agenda to replace the assassinated Third World

project. The current weight of Atlantic power, joined by Australia and Japan, limits the scope for maneuver by elected officials in the poorer nations. A handful of them continue to band together to gain some benefit, or push one kind of policy or another. In 1989, a few NAM states created the Group of Fifteen (G-15).[4] Their first communiqué described the way that all these countries "are undertaking far-reaching economic reforms and structural adjustment measures . . . to enhance the competitiveness, upgrade the technological level and improve efficiency." To do this, the states seek to "mobilize domestic savings and attract foreign financial resources."[5] The G-15 wanted a more urgent response to the debt crisis, although there was no mention of debt forgiveness. The main themes were to increase world trade, open up northern markets to southern goods, and increase growth rates. The NAM agenda was narrowed in these neoliberal times. The second meeting of the G-15, in Caracas (1991), showed the frayed tempers of the managers of the poorer nations. "Our national economies are being restructured and liberalized at considerable social cost and human hardship, while the industrialized countries continue to run large fiscal deficits, to pay billions of dollars in subsidies to inefficient industries and to agricultural production, and to maintain and even intensify tariff and nontariff trade barriers that block exports of developing countries. These asymmetries endanger the viability of the South's own efforts and could lead to social and political instability."[6] Many of the discrete elements of the NAM agenda (UN reform, the need for the UNCTAD and a Common Fund for Commodities, and technology transfer) returned to the G-15. There was, however, no lucid vision for the new dispensation. Neither is there a strong institutional formation to tackle U.S.-driven primacy.

A lack of coherence and dynamism allows the regimes to operate within the rules set by IMF-driven globalization, within the broad ideology of neoliberalism. The reform agenda remains, but it now more often is used by a group of powers to make gains in their national or regional interest. The call for UN reform, for instance, devolved into a call by the Group of Four (Brazil, Germany, India, and Japan) for them to win permanent seats on the Security Council. South Africa, which emerged from apartheid in this new world era, pushed the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) in 2001. NEPAD's core elements included the privatization of basic infrastructure and the incorporation of the African economy into the world economy (regardless of the decline in terms of trade and the continuation of subsidy regimes in the Atlantic economies to the detriment of African commodities). The word partnership in

NEPAD, as with many such documents in the post–Third World, post–Second World era, has come to mean privatization (as in public-private partnerships). The narrow space for maneuver confronted the South Commission in the mid-1980s. It studied the devastation of the darker nations, and yet recommended "the establishment of market relations" as the solution.[7] The patchy and as yet contradictory global vision of the G-15 is neither of the caliber nor the scope of the Bandung agenda.

The limitations of IMF-driven globalization and revanchist traditionalism provoke mass movements across the planet. The battles for land rights and water rights, for cultural dignity and economic parity, for women's rights and indigenous rights, for the construction of democratic institutions and responsive states—these are legion in every country, on every continent. It is from these many creative initiatives that a genuine agenda for the future will arise. When it does, the Third World will have found its successor.

# NOTES

## Introduction

1. Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 1963), 314. I have substituted "project" in place of "aim." The original is "Le Tiers-Monde est aujourd'hui en face de l'Europe comme une masse colassale dont le project doit être d'essayer de résoundre les problèmes auxquels cette Europe n'a pas su apporter de solutions." Frantz Fanon, *Les Dammés de la Terre* (Paris: François Maspero, 1961), 241.
2. George McTurnan Kahin, ed., *The Asian-African Conference: Bandung, Indonesia, April 1955* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1956), 43–44.

## Paris

1. For two excellent histories, see Laurent Dubois, *Avengers of the New World: The Story of the Haitian Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), and *A Colony of Citizens: Revolution and Slave Emancipation in the French Caribbean, 1787–1804* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).
2. Ousmane Sembene's *Le Camp de Thiaroye* (1987) portrays a West African force that returns from Europe after World War II, demands recompense for its time on the battlefield and in the concentration camps, and gets brutally murdered by the French at the movie's end.
3. That same year, Presence Africaine released Chiekh Anta Diop's *Nations Negres et Culture*, a book that sought to show the African roots of Egyptian civilization.
4. Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000), 32.
5. Ibid., 38–39.
6. John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 291.
7. Nguyen Ai Quoc, "An Open Letter to M. Albert Sarraut, Minister of Colonies," in *Ho Chi Minh on Revolution: Selected Writings*, 1920–66, ed. Bernard B. Fall (New York: Signet, 1968), 30.

For their modern manifestation and links to the radical Islamist rhetoric and institutions, see ibid., 153–55; Ayman al-Yassini, *Religion and State in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1985), 70.

29. Quoted in Sindhi, "King Faisal," 193.
30. Quoted in *Kabul Times*, May 28, 1978.
31. The story of the formation of this alliance is in Steve Coll, *Ghost Wars: The Secret History of the CIA, Afghanistan, and Bin Laden, from the Soviet Invasion to September 10, 2001* (New York: Penguin, 2004).
32. Quoted in "Oui, la CIA est entreé en Afghanistan avant les Russes," *Le Nouvel Observateur*, January 15–21, 1998.
33. For an excellent appraisal, see Stephen Kotkin, *Steeltown USSR: Soviet Society in the Gorbachev Era* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).
34. Thane Gustafson, *Crisis amid Plenty: The Politics of Soviet Energy under Brezhnev and Gorbachev* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989).
35. Abdul Hameed Nayyar, "Madrasa Education," in *Education and the State: Fifty Years of Pakistan*, ed. Pervez Hoodbhoy (Karachi, Pakistan: Oxford University Press, 1998), 226.
36. Quoted in Owen Bennett-Jones, *Pakistan: Eye of the Storm* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2002), 260.
37. In Sudan, for instance, the WML enabled the establishment of the Islamic Charter Front (1964) of Hasan al-Turabi, later the leader of the Sudanese Muslim Brotherhood. John Voll, "The Evolution of Islamic Fundamentalism in Twentieth-Century Sudan," in *Islam, Nationalism, and Radicalism in Egypt and Sudan*, ed. Gabriel Warburg and Uri Kupferschmidt (New York: Praeger, 1983).

## Conclusion

1. "Address by Mwalimu Julius K. Nyerere, Chairman of the South Commission, at the Commission's Inauguration Ceremony, 2nd October 1987" (Geneva: South Centre, 1987).
2. World Bank, *World Development Report 2000/2001: Attacking Poverty* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 51.
3. *The Challenge of the South: The Report of the South Commission* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 148.
4. The fifteen are Algeria, Argentina, Brazil, Egypt, Indonesia, India, Jamaica, Malaysia, Mexico, Nigeria, Peru, Senegal, Venezuela, Yugoslavia, and Zimbabwe.
5. Quoted in Kripa Sridharan, "G-15 and South-South Cooperation: Promise and Performance," *Third World Quarterly* 19, no. 3 (September 1998): 357–74.
6. Quoted in ibid.
7. *The Challenge of the South*, 274–75.