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Is There a Third World in the U.S.?

Most of the discussion on the Third World centers on Latin America, Africa and southern Asia, the world's poorest regions in terms of GDP and those with the smallest Human Development Index. The "Third World" is looked at as if they were fetal countries, umbilically tied to the "First World." But in the context of globalization and corporate neocolonialism, the dichotomy of wealth and poverty has shifted from the local to the global. No longer is the government of a particular nation the sole arbiter of a nation, and no longer is a nation alone responsible for its economic and political realities. Multinational corporations and the growth of the First World's imperial sphere has made the boundaries between "First World" and "Third World" movable entities. Within what is typically defined as the Third World, there are very wealthy classes profiting from the global economy and carving out their own First Worlds within otherwise impoverished nations.

Through this process, one could argue that the boundaries have moved within the United States itself, as the ever-increasing wealth gap carves out the developed world from the underdeveloped. Several distinct trends that indicate a "third-worldization" clearly occurring in the world's wealthiest and most powerful nation, and if we look at the Third World as less of a distinct place and more as a sector of the world than a set apart by specific conditions created by the First World, we can redefine the Third World in a way that more accurately examines the wealth distribution in the world today. This redefinition allows us to explore the idea of a Third World, and through that exploration question whether a Third World exists within the United States.

First, an adequate justification for the term "Third World" should be provided to explain its use in this paper. The definition of the Third World is as controversial as the semantic debate over terms like "developing" or "underdeveloped" or even "majority world." "Developing" connotes that a nation is somehow inadequate or less of a nation because of its economic status. "Underdeveloped" uses the verb in its intransitive form, implying the action of one nation (i.e. a "First World" nation) upon another nation. "Majority world," though true in the statistical sense as two-thirds of the world qualifies as such, suffers the threat of eliminating national identity from individual nation and instead categorizes all impoverished nations into one monoculture. Some argue that the term "Third World" has similarly derogatory or wealth-centric connotations, and that it seems to set these nations apart from the rest of the world in terms of global economics.

But that is the argument I intend to make—that the Third World is involved in the world market, but as unequal participants made worthy only by their attachments to the First World. This separation is not only defined as a separation of nations, but rather as a separation of peoples and classes. Thus, though it perpetuates Cold War semantics, the term "Third World" remains the best identifier of this sector of the world, as it does not limit the definition to a national or personal identity and it incorporates the otherworldliness foisted upon the world's poorest sectors. By looking at it as a "world" we can better see the ways in which the Third World is set apart from the First World, and we are not limited to looking at it as specific nations or regions. This opens the door

for a wider analysis of the Third World, and makes it possible to examine whether there is a Third World in the United States today.

But, then, what is the Third World? Traditional definitions would peg it as the nations aligned neither with the United States or Russia during the Cold War, those who lingered somewhere between the capitalist and communist camps, either by reason of self-interest or an inability to participate in the East/West schism due to political unrest or economic distress. This way of defining the Third World, though, became obsolete with the fall of the “Second World” in the early 1990s. But the term persists and remains useful to understanding the wealth and power complexes of international relations. Today many would qualify the Third World as simply the poorest nations of the world, based on GDP and other traditional standards of wealth. More thorough and accurate definitions incorporate development categories like health statistics, birth rates, literacy rates, access to education and life expectancy into the qualifications, widening the lens through which the First World/Third World dichotomy can be viewed. Also imperative to this definition is the colonial dimension, as most nations typically classified as Third World are former colonies of Western powers who still today suffer the burden of struggling to find a post-colonial identity or are still held under the pressures of neocolonial powers.

An accurate classification of the Third World must be derived from these traditional definitions but also coupled with an analysis of the current global power dynamics and the way in which they have created and continue to create the Third World. As Eric R. Wolf argues in *Europe and the People Without History*, the creation of the Third World came when Europe exported people and ideas to other continents, eliminating existing societies and societal structures and replacing them with colonial power—creating a “people without history,” as Wolf describes it. The colonies in African, Latin America and Southern Asia therefore developed a reliance on European nations for not only political leadership and guidance but also employment, basic material needs and the distribution of wealth. The colonial system established a core economic zone in Europe and made the colonies peripheral to that core, working for it but not a real part of it, subjugated to it but with no actual say on the administrative end. The nations were relegated to the role of a fetus linked across the ocean to a distant mother nation, and when they ceased to be colonies, that cord was ripped from them. The nations hadn’t been able to forge their own identity or develop their own capacity to operate in the world. They entered the world as independent nations without lungs that had been allowed to breathe on their own, and were not prepared to compete in the global market. The Third World, as traditionally defined, is the result of this colonial leaching and subsequent separation.

Without their own ability to create infrastructure, political stability, or capital the nations were left vulnerable, a vulnerability that was seized upon by multinational corporations and the international business world, the modern equivalent of the colonialism Wolf discusses. But today, as neoliberalism has become the consensus in the “West,” colonialism continues to manifest itself in vulnerable areas in ways not so different from the colonialism of years past. Though dominant nations may no longer be able to declare full-out hegemonic rule of foreign nations, big business, multinational corporations, free trade deals and the global triumph of corporate media are able to enact control over vulnerable sectors of the world. The resources and production of the Third World are no longer going directly back to a foreign nation as the colonial power, but to

corporations and the world's elite. The Third World participates in the economy only to the extent that they are contributing their resources and workforce to the mother businesses or corporations, which are almost always "First World" businesses or corporations exported to foreign nations. The rift between the powerful and wealthy and those subjugated to that power and wealth continues to exist and is widening. The world's economic and political power remains in the hands of very few, though who those few are is no longer simply a matter of national identity, though, of course, the majority of those with power are from the First World. Globalization has led to a globalized strata of wealth, with multinational corporations as the power holders instead of the British, French, or Dutch governments. Similarly, the globalization of corporate media has mainlined control over the information available to people and the control people have over their own media. Just as capital is in the control of the global elite, so too is the power of communication, an element imperative to self-determination and political power.

With this globalization of wealth and power through the neoliberal model, so, too has poverty been globalized. Neoliberal policies have created a reorganization of the world, a clear separation of the haves from the have-nots that isn't confined to borders. An increasing number of rural dwellers move to cities in pursuit of factory jobs as small agriculture becomes less practical in the face of imported goods and corporate farms. Low-wage jobs are exported to foreign nations where labor costs are driven lower and lower in the race to the bottom. Corporations have no interest in where the jobs are going, and are only interested in how low prices and how high profits can go. Any sense of national identity has been nullified in the interest of accruing wealth. Any degree of control, empowerment or self-determination is denied to the Third World, causing them to remain alienated from and external to the First World processes that determine much of what happens in the Third World. As a result, those in the Third World still struggle to carve out a national identities, establish national political and economic infrastructures, and provide basic health and education services, causing them to remain on the margins.

Through the shedding of a national idea of colonialism in favor of globalized economic neocolonialism, the Third World, too, has been globalized. The pursuit of capital and the exploitation of vulnerable sectors of the world has effectively brought down the borders of the Third World. The rich/poor dichotomy has shifted from a local paradigm to global. In even the most destitute of countries, a wealthy class exists that is profiting from the dynamics of neocolonialism. And in the wealthiest of nations, there exist large sectors of society living in conditions that are not unlike the traditional definition of the Third World.

This is becoming more and more clearly the case in the United States, where several distinct trends that indicate a "third-worldization" clearly occurring in the world's wealthiest and most powerful nation. The poorest sectors of society and the most marginalized people in the United States live in conditions that, relative to the general standard of living, are equitable to living in the Third World as traditionally defined. By looking at the qualifications used to define the Third World—economy, health, education, and birth and death rates—it is clear that a portion of American society lives in the Third World.

By looking at the wealth distribution alone, it is clear that a bifurcation exists in the United States that separates the First World from the Third. Both the number of

people in poverty and the poverty rate are increasing, the U.S. Census Bureau reports. The top 1 percent of Americans claims the same wealth as the bottom 95 percent, according to the report "Recent Trends in Wealth Ownership," published in 2000. The same report found that the average wealth of the top 1 percent of Americans is \$10 million, while the average wealth of the bottom 40 percent of Americans is \$1,000. The gap between rich and poor is clearly not shrinking, and the poorest sectors of society are only getting poorer and poorer in relative terms. On a surface level, it may seem that the United States is getting wealthier, as more capital is accrued by individuals in the United States. But in reality, there are very few individuals enjoying those profits, and that overall increase only serves to desensitize Americans to the reality of the wealth gap.

If we look even more closely, it is clear that the separation noted in economic terms has racial and geographic undertones as well. Median income for Hispanic households is \$33,000, 31 percent lower than the median household income of whites, the Census Bureau found. The poverty rate for African Americans is 24.4 percent, compared to 10.6 percent of whites. Clearly there is a separation in society in purely economic terms, a marginalization of particular sectors of society that sets them apart from participating fully in the national or global economy.

There is a similar gap as far as health, with certain sectors of society living in conditions far below the standards that are generally accepted as First World standards. These gaps are regional as well as racial and socio-economic. According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 59.9 percent of all tuberculosis cases come from seven states alone, many of them states that have large, poor urban areas. Tuberculosis continues to most commonly afflict minority and foreign-born individuals, the Center also reports. The statistics on AIDS are just as disproportionately distributed. The Congressional Black Caucus reported in 2001 that the AIDS rate for African Americans was nearly ten times the rate among whites, and that AIDS is the number one cause of death in the U.S. for black adults aged 25 to 44.

We can also look at the effects of free trade deals and economic marginalization on migration and the ways in which that has helped form a Third World in the United States. In the Western Hemisphere, there has been a clear migration to the north. The number of immigrants has doubled since NAFTA was enacted in 1994 and will likely continue to increase with CAFTA. Low wage jobs are exported to Mexico and Central America, but conditions there have not improved, and the clearest direct result has been immigration to the United States in search of the same jobs, but with higher standards of payment and working conditions. This massive migration has also contributed to the creation of a Third World in the United States, where the poorest of the poor are dwelling among the First World but are not afforded any of the rights or privileges of that society. They come to the United States not to become full citizens of the nation, but rather to make money that will be funneled back to their native land, a process which brings short term economic gain to their families but does little to sustain the long-term economy of their native country. These people, for the most part, also live literally separated from the rest of the United States, in Latino neighborhoods, in migrant worker camps, or in innercity tenements. They are isolated by language and have little ability to participate in the governmental or political dynamics of the society in which they dwell. This relocation of the Third World into the First World is directly the result of First World policy and

practice effectively perpetuating the existence of the Third World, which the globalized economy has forced *into* the First World.

The idea of the Third World existing in the United States more relevantly discussed by looking at access to information, the ability to self determine, and control of one's own economic and social conditions rather than merely quoting statistics or pinpointing specifically marginalized groups of individuals.

The world-wide control of multinational corporations and the wealthy elite is not limited to control of capital, but extends to more subtle ways of controlling society. Governmental lying and the dumbing down of the American populous by those lies, corporate control of the media, the manipulation of education and the resources needed to provide education, and the disenfranchisement of certain sectors of society also contribute to the creation of a Third World in the United States that is not able to fully participate in the social, economic and political territory of the "First World." Though all in the United State may be theoretically endowed with the same rights, if someone is poor, a criminal, a non-citizen, unemployed, non-English speaking or illiterate, the ability to participate is severely limited, and the ability to choose a future for oneself is taken away and essentially re-appropriated to the power structure.

If we can look at the Third World as a set of conditions created by the First World to exploit and overpower a sector of society, rather than as specific nations, it is easier to examine the global dynamics that perpetuate its existence. The growth of multinational corporations, big media, and free trade zones has globalized the marketplace and concentrated power to the international elite. This process of redefining power not by national identity but by the economic power of individuals or corporations makes a redefinition of the Third World necessary. Through this redefinition, it is possible to look at the Third World as it exists in the United States in a way that deconstructs the myth of a First World defined solely by nationality.

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