

# The South also rises: The Poorer Nations: A History of the Global South

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*Review of The Poorer Nations: A Possible History of the Global South*

by Vijay Prashad

It is not so far-fetched to imagine Walter Benjamin's Angel of History succumbing to the temptation, and stressing that the time of the Global South has finally come.

Oh yes, it will be a long, arduous and winding road. But would the Google/Facebook generation need only one textbook detailing the stuff of dreams, trials and tribulations of the developing world in the early 21st century, this would be it, Vijay Prashad's just published [The Poorer Nations](#).

Call it the post-modern, digital follow-up to Frantz Fanon's classic *The Wretched of the Earth*.

This is an absolutely essential book to be read alongside another by Prashad, director of international studies at Trinity College, Connecticut, and author of the splendid *The Darker Nations*, which should be read as a preamble to this book, sets the scene right from the start - using the requisite Fanon quote; by 1961, what was configured was a fight between the Third World Project ("for peace, for bread and for justice") and the Atlantic Project. Key actors: the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), the de facto secretariat of the Third World Project, and the Group of 77 developing nations, created in 1964 to act on behalf of NAM in the United Nations.

The founders of the NAM enjoyed iconic status in the post-colonial world; Jawaharlal Nehru in India, Gamal Abdel Nasser in Egypt, Sukarno in Indonesia, Josip Broz Tito in Yugoslavia. Yet they knew this was an uphill battle. As Prashad notes, "the UN had been hijacked by the five permanent members of the Security Council. The IMF [International Monetary Fund] and the World Bank had been captured by the Atlantic powers, and the GATT [General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, precursor to the World Trade Organization] was designed to undermine any attempt by the new nations to revise the international economic order".

As for the Atlantic Project, a 1969 quote from Henry Kissinger - co-destroyer of Cambodia, Argentine leader Augusto Pinochet enabler, disgusted Saudi ally (the "most feckless and gutless of the Arabs") and praiser-in-chief of the Iranian Shah ("a tough, mean guy") - would suffice: "Nothing important can come from the South. The axis of history starts in Moscow, goes to Bonn, crosses over to Washington, and then goes to Tokyo. What happens in the South is of no importance."

Atlanticists were fiercely against the “no importance” Third World Project, but also against social democracy and communism. Their Holy Grail was to wallow in easy profits provided by a new global geography of production, “technological shifts that enabled firms to take advantage of differential wage rates” – most of all, those very low wages paid all across East Asia.

So the stage was set for the emergence of neoliberalism. Here Prashad moves in parallel with the indispensable David Harvey, detailing how the Global South became ripe to be fully (re)exploited; bye bye national liberation ideas of collective good.

Keep the barbarians out

With the IMF currently part of the troika dictating austerity to most of Western Europe (alongside the European Commission and the European Central Bank), it’s easy to forget that in 1944 things were already pretty warped. The developing world had no say whatsoever in Bretton Woods, not to mention any sort of control over the UN’s five-member Security Council. It was the silence of the lambs; the wolves prevailed, and inequality was set in stone.

Prashad proceeds with the indispensable details of how the US dollar became the effective world currency, with the US swinging the price of the dollar globally, regardless of any consequences; the formation of the Group of Seven as essentially an anti-developing world mechanism (and not anti-Soviet); and of course the much-dreaded Trilateral Commission, set up by Chase Manhattan’s David Rockefeller to impose the will of the North against the South.

And guess who was the Trilateral’s intellectual architect? The ineffable Zbigniew Brzezinski, later president Jimmy Carter’s consigliere. Dr Zbig wanted to “contain the “contagious threat of global anarchy”. Divide and rule, once again; the periphery needed to be put in its place.

By the way, one should always remember that in his 1997 epic *The Grand Chessboard*, Dr Zbig, who became the foreign policy adviser to Barack Obama in 2008, wrote, “The three grand imperatives of imperial geo-strategy are to prevent collusion and maintain security dependence among the vassals, to keep tributaries pliant and protected, and to keep the barbarians from coming together.” For a long while the “vassals” were easily contained; but Dr Zbig, one step ahead of Kissinger, was already planning how to contain the two key “barbarians”, ascending Eurasian powers Russia and China.

The Group of Seven anyway was a roaring success, pushing its “theory of governance” everywhere, implemented by – who else – the Bretton Woods mafia. Prashad neatly defines it: “What went by the name of neoliberalism was less a coherent economic doctrine than a fairly straightforward campaign by the propertied classes to maintain or restore their position of dominance”, via the David Harvey-coined “accumulation by dispossession”, now also known by millions of Europeans under the codename “austerity”.

The numbers tell the story. In 1981, the net flow of capital to the Third World was \$35.2 billion. In 1987, \$30.7 billion left the Third World for Western banks. Praise the Lord and his law set in stone, also known as Structural Adjustment, based on “conditionality” (savage privatization, deregulation, destruction of social services, financial “liberalization”).

Paraphrasing Dylan, when you got nothing, you still got this nothing to lose. There was never any political strategy by the North to deal with the debt crisis of the 1980s. The Global South lambs were only allowed in a sorry procession to receive their structural adjustment consecrated host one by one.

But still that was not enough. With the fall of the USSR, Washington was free to develop Full Spectrum Dominance. Those who did not fully abide were branded “rogue states” – as in Cuba, Iran, Iraq, Libya, North Korea and even, for a while, Malaysia (because it would not bow to the IMF).

But then, slowly but surely, the Global South began to rise. Prashad details the reasons – the commodity boom driven by China; commodity profits improving Latin American finances; more foreign direct investment roaming the world. The Global South started trading more within itself.

Then, in June 2003, at the margins of the Group of Eight gathering in Evian, France, emerged something called IBSA (the India-Brazil-South Africa Dialogue). IBSA was keen to “maximize the benefits of globalization” and promote sustained economic growth. Brazilian Foreign Minister Celso Amorim defined it at the time as “an ideology in the best sense of the word – an ideology of democracy, diversity, tolerance, a search for cooperation”.

In parallel, China was – what else – booming. It’s essential to remind anyone at this point of that fateful November 1978 trip by Deng Xiaoping to Singapore, where he was hosted by Lee Kuan Yew; Prashad could have built a whole chapter around it. This was the clincher. Deng knew right away that he would milk the *guanxi* (“connections”) of the Chinese diaspora for all it’s worth. I’ll never forget my very own first visit to Shenzhen only one month after Deng’s fabled Southern Tour of January 1992. That’s when the boom really started. At the time, I felt I was mostly neck-deep in Maoist China.

Fast forward to China now helping to develop Africa. Vast swathes of the developing world would not consider blindly adopting a *zhongguo moshi* – the Chinese Model. It’s more like Prashad introducing this wonderful quote from Donald Kaberuka, a former minister of finance in Rwanda and now president of the African Development Bank: “We can learn from [the Chinese] how to organize our trade policy, to move from low to middle income status, to educate our children in skills and areas that pay off in just a couple of years.”

BRIC by BRIC

Which brings us to the BRICS, created as a group in 2009 out of the BRIC-IBSA union – and now the top locomotive of the Global South.

By then, inevitably, Blame China had already become an established fine art in Washington; the Chinese must imperatively become consumers. They are, and they will – but in their own rhythm, and following their [own political model](#).

Even the IMF already admits that by 2016 the US may cease to be the world’s largest economy. So the great Fernand Braudel was already right when he wrote *The Perspective of the World: Civilization and Capitalism, Fifteenth- Eighteenth Century*, stressing this would be the “sign of autumn” for Atlantic hegemony.

Of course there are huge problems with the BRICS, as Prashad details. Their domestic policies can indeed be interpreted as a sort of “neoliberalism with Southern characteristics”.

They are far from being an ideological alternative to neoliberalism. They have been helpless to counteract the overwhelming military hegemony of the US and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (see, for instance, the Libya fiasco). And they are not the embryo of a revolutionary shift in the world order.

But at least they are “allowing a breath of fresh air to oxygenate the stagnant world of neoliberal imperialism”.

The fresh air will circulate in the form of a new development bank, a BRICS Bank of the South version of the South American Banco del Sur, founded in 2009 (here’s Prashad’s [critical take](#). China and Brazil have set up a \$30 billion currency swap deal to pay for trade, bypassing the US dollar. Beijing and Moscow are deepening their strategic partnership. (See [BRICS go over the wall](#), Asia Times Online, March 26, 2013.)

The BRICS as they stand – three major commodities producers plus two major commodities consumers trying to find a way out of a Western-conducted disaster – are just a start. They are already evolving as a powerful geopolitical actor stressing multi-polarity. They are bound to be joined by the next BRICS – the MIST (Mexico, Indonesia, South Korea and Turkey). And don’t forget Iran. Time for BRICS MIIST?

What’s graphically obvious is that the Global South has had enough – from the ravages of casino turbo-capitalism to NATO playing Robocop from North Africa to Southwest Asia, not to mention Eurasia being encircled by that Dr Strangelove chimera – a missile shield.

The Global South remains fraught with absurdities; one just has to think of the oil and gas GCC petro-monarchies – those paragons of “democracy” – now configured as an annex to NATO. Few developments lately have been so appalling as the Arab League licking their NATO master’s boots, breaking international law to install dodgy Syrian “rebels” in the chair of a sovereign state, one of its very own founding members.

Weird scenes inside the goldmine

The fall of neoliberalism will be bloody – and it will take time. Prashad attempts an objective analysis in terms of the unity of the Global South, drawing on the work of Indian Marxist Prabhat Patnaik.

Patnaik is a sound fellow. He knows that “a coordinated global resistance is not on the horizon”. Instead, “he emphasizes the centrality of building resistance within the nation-state, and his analysis can easily be extended to regions (he writes mainly of India, but the analysis he provides is equally applicable to the Bolivarian experiments in Latin America)”.

So the road map spells tackling the “peasant question”, which is essentially about land and rights; and to concentrate on the immediate struggles of improving people’s living and working conditions. Inevitably Prashad has to refer to Bolivian vice president Alvaro Garcia Linera, one of Latin America’s top contemporary intellectuals.

In many aspects, where the emancipation of the Global South is more advanced is in parts of South America; I was hugely impressed when I was in Bolivia in early 2008. Prashad neatly summarizes Linera’s analysis of how the process develops:

It begins with a crisis of the state that enables a “dissident social bloc” to

mobilize the people into a political project. A "catastrophic stand-off" develops between the bloc of power and the bloc of the people, which in the case of Latin America was able to be resolved for the moment on the side of the people. The new government must then "convert opposition demands into acts of state," and build a deeper and broader hegemony by "combining the ideas of mobilized society with material resources provided by or via the state." The turning point ("point of bifurcation"), for Garcia Linera, comes through a "series of confrontations" between the blocs that are resolved in unexpected ways, with either the consolidation of the new situation or the reconstitution of the old. We are at or near the point of bifurcation. What will come next cannot be predicted.

What is definitely known by now by the best minds in Asia, Africa and Latin America, is that there was never an end of history, as parroted by pathetic orphans of Hegel; and there was never an end of geography, as parroted by "world is flat" globalization dancing fools. The Global South's intellectual liberation from the North is finally on. And it's irreversible. There's no turning back to the old order. If this was a movie, it would be 1968 replayed all over again - full time, all the time; let's be realists, and demand, and implement, the impossible.

*The Poorer Nations: A Possible History of the Global South* by Vijay Prashad. Verso, March 2013. ISBN-10: 1844679527. Price US\$26. 300 pages.

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