

How the French Revolution Gave Birth to the Third World

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October 29, 2015

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A Modern Media Company



Henri de La Rochejaquelein (1772-94) at the Battle of Cholet, 17th October 1793 (oil on canvas)

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WHY YOU SHOULD CARE

The term is still bandied about, but what does it mean? A reckoning.

Four years ago, the president of the World Bank got up before a well-heeled Princeton audience and declared the Third World over.

“If 1989 saw the end of the Second World with Communism’s demise, then 2009 saw the end of what was known as the Third World,” Robert Zoellick announced. Economies were newly rising, power shifting: “North and South, East and West, are now points on a compass, not economic destinies,” he said.

On its face, it was an odd proposition. For starters, Zoellick was about two decades late: Were the meaning of the Third World true to its origins, it should have died when the Cold War did. Then again, the meaning of the Third World has been slippery almost since its conception. Though Zoellick and many others consider the term *passé*, it lingers — in journals, in books, on the lips of subalterns throughout the world. Maybe that’s because no alternative has as pliable a meaning.

More on that in a moment. But first, some Third World datapoints:

Date of Birth: August 14, 1952

Place of Birth: *L’Observateur*, a French weekly

Proud Papa: Alfred Sauvy, French demographer and the first director of the Institut National des Etudes Démographique.

Circumstances of Birth: Sauvy wrote a column, “Trois Mondes, Une Planète,” that worried that poor countries would get lost in the Cold War. Engaged in an arms race, the capitalist West and communist East would neglect world hunger, poverty, and disease. And it would be to their peril, he warned. “After all, this Third World — ignored, exploited, scorned like the Third Estate — wants to be something, too.”

Sauvy’s French audience would know that Third Estate allusion. Before the French Revolution, the Estates-General were France’s legislative body, comprised of the First Estate (the clergy), the Second Estate (the aristocracy) and the Third Estate (the commoners — aka, everyone else). In 1789, the Abbé Sieyès, a philosopher and revolutionary, published a pamphlet that began: “What is the Third Estate? Everything. What has it been hitherto in the political order? Nothing. What does it desire to be? Something.” In Sauvy’s implicit scheme, the capitalist West was the aristocracy, the communist bloc the clergy, and the leftovers ... the leftovers.

Although Sauvy would claim credit for coining “Third World” (en français: “*Tiers Monde*”), the term did not seem to catch on quickly in his field, population science. Sauvy himself relied on another term in his 1961 book *Fertility and Survival* — “underdeveloped.” Sauvy didn’t like “underdeveloped” — he called it “even more cruel than its predecessors with its scientific pretension and its implication of superiority” — but said it was the accepted term.

The term Third World did, however, catch on in the softer sciences — like cultural studies, where it was tentatively adopted and then roundly critiqued. The complaints? That Third World lumped in unlike countries in very different situations, like Chile, Haiti, China. It sounds derogatory, like third place. It is a definition in opposition to, rather than an affirmative one. And, of course, now that the Cold War is over, so is the notion of a non-aligned bloc.

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Indeed, years before Zoellick's pronouncement, international NGOs and aid agencies had abandoned the term. They haven't found a good replacement. Like Sauvy, they found the phrase "underdeveloped countries" politically incorrect, or unjustifiably normative. Somehow, "less developed countries" and "developing countries" were considered less condescending. Of late, there have been movements to use terms like "Global South," and even "Majority Countries."

Most of these terms irritate. Why not just say "poor countries," which is what we really mean?

In that context, perhaps Third World remains useful, at least as Sauvy framed it. His Third World was no more condescending than Third Estate: Both carry with them the prospect of revolution, of displacing the powers-that-be, of changing the system. And though it teeters on the verge of obsolescence, the term Third World hangs on, tenacious. Reports of its demise are exaggerated. The International Third World Studies Journal and Review (est. 1989) folded in 2006, but the Association of Third World Studies remains, with a print journal and quaint-looking website too.

So does the Brown University Third World Center. Brown's use of Third World, it explains, arose after students rejected "minority" because "of the negative connotations of inferiority and powerlessness with which the word 'minority' is often associated." Outside Brown, the term Third World may carry "negative socioeconomic connotations," but at Brown, it signifies "a cultural model of empowerment and liberation."

Turns out, the Third World is not a place — it's a state of mind. We think Sauvy and Frantz Fanon would both agree.

October 28, 2015