

NOT THREE WORLDS BUT ONE!

MANJUNATH PENDAKUR

There are three self-evident truths or experiences common to all us who live in the belly of the beast that is monopoly capitalism:

1) Monopoly capitalists have historically been very adept at conquering each and every new innovation in communication technologies for their own ends. 2) Just a capital has always been global, media technologies seldom respect national boundaries and media corporations look at the world as one large market. 3) In general, corporate media are racist, sexist and homophobic.

Now that you know where I come from, let me begin my talk.

The title of my talk is drawn from an African song that was played on a student-run radio station, WNUR at Northwestern University. The host of the show, an African-American student of mine introduced the song by saying that the three world dichotomy - First World, Second World, and Third World - does not make sense. In fact, he went on to say, "We were there before, so why are we not the first world?" Such idealistic conceptions are not new in the dominant media, but what is new is that artists and many Third World people are refusing to accept the category called the Third World. Such reaction may have come about primarily because of another media representation of the Third World as nothing but problems—famine, pestilence, coups, earthquakes, dictators, wars, sources of drugs, boat people, and so on! As such reports are stripped of their particular historic context, they quickly become two dimensional narratives.

The concept of Third World, however, is rooted in a particular history and, for nearly a generation, has meant something quite specific. What I am going to argue here is that we need to return it to its original conception.

The concept "Third World" goes back to 1955 when in an Indonesian city called Bandung several leaders of the former colonial possessions met to discuss the world situation and the possibility of creating a forum in which the Western colonial powers would have

little control. Led by Nehru of India, Sukarno of Indonesia, Nasser of Egypt, and Tito of Yugoslavia, this group created the Non-Aligned Nations Movement (NAM) as a countervailing force to the two superpowers—the United States and the Soviet Union.

It is important to note here that high on the agenda of this group were information and culture as issues related to neocolonial domination. National control over these resources was seen as essential to the independence and well-being of their respective nations.

Furthermore, this essentially anti-imperialist group was seeking access to trade and investment and balance in media flows from a world that was hardly equitable. Quite significantly, these leaders articulated not only an independent existence from the superpowers but tied their information/cultural needs to economic development issues.

This group of nations seeking economic and political independence came to be known as the Third World and the term found currency in media coverage around the world.

While the many newly-born nation-states of Asia and Africa contemplated independence in global affairs, the United States latched onto the doctrine of “free” flow of information. The opponents of the free flow—several NAM nations and the USSR—argued correctly that free flow simply enhanced the power of the transnational corporations and their allied states.

There is actually nothing free about the “free” flow doctrine! In fact, it is a self serving doctrine because it is an ideology which helps keep world markets open for US goods and services in the name of freedom, an old mercantilist idea in a new costume. The trouble with the concept is that its proponents don’t practice it in their own home territories. While the US keeps out ideas that it considers dangerous by using immigration laws, State Department lists, and even outright censorship, the dominant media preempts oppositional voices within the country, be they people of color or women or indigenous people. In the NAM countries, with a few exceptions, a similar marginalization of “other” voices occurs—particularly in their broadcast media.

As many of you know, the struggle for a New World Information and Communication Order in the UNESCO, limited as it was, resulted in the Reagan Administration's withdrawal from that organization. Reagan had to give something to the conservative lobby led by the Heritage Foundation and demagogues like Pat Buchanan and George Will. In the last five years, it appears as though the whole agenda in UNESCO has been modified to fit the imperatives of the US as it has begun to tout the free flow doctrine again.

This post-World War II ideological struggle dealt with some nettlesome questions: Who should produce information? What kinds of information should be produced for peace and understanding in the world? How should it be distributed? By whom? When information crosses national boundaries, how should nation-states behave?

These questions will not go away because the post-WWII international structure of domination led by the United States still persists with some modifications. Yes, the superpower conflict has been terminated, at least for the time being, largely due to the initiatives undertaken by President Gorbachev. The US may even be forced to withdraw its military from Europe, but that's hardly the case in other parts of the world. According to a Senate report, by the mid-1960s the US had by treaty or agreement committed its forces and equipment to 43 countries at some 375 major military bases and 3,000 minor military facilities.¹ These guns, we may remember here, are all turned against people of color, both at home and abroad! Just as the Berlin Wall was coming down, the US poured millions of dollars into Nicaragua to defeat the Sandinistas. Such wars against national liberation movements will continue, I am afraid, including blatant ideological aggressions such as Radio Marti in the case of Cuba.

The US is also clearly consolidating its hegemonic status over the North American continent by way of free trade treaties. Canada has already signed such a historic treaty. US power, while it seemed to be on the decline since its defeat in Vietnam, may once again be on an ascent. What may be happening, quite clearly, is that we have moved toward a world of three gigantic, economically powerful, continental blocs—US, Europe, and East Asia—each with its own "south."

All of these changes may mean significant reductions in development assistance to countries in Latin America, Asia and Africa. In the case of the US, the disappearance of the communist enemy will accelerate the decline in development assistance. The mind set in Washington has for long been, when presented with the aid budget, " Who is the enemy?"

Reverse flow of funds from the Third World to industrialized countries of the West has continued and, in fact, appears to have grown since 1982 when it became apparent that Mexico was going to be unable to service its debt. The International Monetary Fund was accorded the new role of *debt collector* and *enforcer* for the major banks. The debtor countries made heroic efforts at adjustment but were ever deeper in trouble. Net payments from all developing countries reached \$36 billion in 1985. They totalled \$242 billion by 1988, most of it paid out to commercial banks.² By 1987, the World Bank was receiving more in interest and repayment than it was disbursing in new loans. The only region of the world which has not been affected by the disorders of the international system of trade and payments and associated debt problems of the 1980s is South Asia. Even there, for example in India, growing foreign debt is widely discussed as a major national problem of the nineties.

This systematic impoverishment of the Third World, on such a massive scale, and the resulting austerity measures imposed by the International Monetary Fund cannot promise a society where all people have access to information.

I believe that the NWICO debates offer us an important lesson. The nation-states became the principal articulators of what it is that human beings in different parts of the world wanted. As loci of power, they inevitably constructed the argument and articulated it in ways that would not challenge that power. The right to communicate, to receive knowledge and to live without fear are as fundamental as any other basic human rights such as access to food, water, clothing, education, and housing. What history has taught us is that nation-states do a miserable job of meeting these fundamental needs of human populations all over the world. We have to figure out ways to move these debates out of organizations such as the UNESCO and into other public spheres where we could mobilize a countervailing

force to imperialism. Every time President Bush speaks of a “new world order”, we must ask him if it guarantees our basic needs as well as our right to receive information and our right to communicate.

This paper was presented at a plenary session on “Global Crisis: Media, Democracy and the Left” at the Midwest Radical Scholars and Activists Conference held in Chicago on October 19, 1990.

Notes

1. Edward S. Herman, “The Military-Industrial Complex as a Political Economic Feedback System”, unpublished paper, 1990, p.9.
2. Kari Levitt, “Debt, Adjustment and Development: Looking to the 1990s”, *Economic and Political Weekly*, July 21, 1990, p.1589.

