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The 'Global South' is a concept well past its sell-by date

0 comments

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It is time for this vague, homogenising and unhelpful north-south dichotomy to go the way of the 'third world', to be replaced with more careful and complex ways of naming the issues we study, argues Valeria Ruiz Perez

From the 2000s onwards, the term Global South has become **extremely popular**, both in political discourse and academia. With growing calls for the **diversification** and **decolonisation** of the curriculum, the inclusion of 'southern scholarship' has also gained significant traction, and research on the *exotic* 'south' seems to be receiving increasing attention from the 'north'.

As a Latin American researcher and educator, the north-south dichotomy has always made me uncomfortable. Despite my discomfort, I often find myself inadvertently using the distinction: as vague and homogenising as it is, it seems to offer a quick and effective enough referent for academic discussions – in a sense, although problematic, we all know what we mean when use the term. But, on the

other hand, using the distinction seems to imply at least some acceptance and agreement with the ways in which these concepts frame our conceptions of social reality. My discomfort, of course, is shared by others, who have expressed their concerns about its **geographic inaccuracy**, the ways it **overlooks significant differences among extremely diverse contexts**, its **colonial legacy**, and, more generally, its undeniable **imprecision and inaccuracy**.

Intellectual dizziness

However, my discomfort, although involving a combination of these concerns, also stems from the fact that I struggle to see how, **despite its utopian and emancipatory potential**, the concept may be helpful in moving beyond the rigid conceptual frameworks and colonial structures in which it is deeply embedded. Mbembe **has suggested** that the decolonisation of education involves an ongoing process of seeing ourselves more clearly, and I'm doubtful that the north-south distinction can play a significant role in clarifying our vision and helping us emerge from the state of intellectual dizziness that it induces.

An overview of some of the category's many uses may be helpful in clarifying my discomfort. Global South is said in many ways, and its use ranges from **imperialist agendas to emancipatory projects**. To some, the polysemic character of the term is a sign of its potential to be appropriated by emancipatory and **subversive** projects. To others, its vagueness is its biggest downfall, lending itself to the justification and advancement of neo-colonial agendas, and carrying with it the same pejorative background as its predecessor – the 'third world'.

Dividing the world

On the one hand, in the mainstream developmental sense, the category refers to 'underdeveloped' regions of the globe, **previously referred to as the third world**, which can be somewhat geographically located at the south of the former colonial centres. This presupposes a division of the world into central and peripheral economies, in which the south is defined by high levels of inequality, poverty, unemployment, and crime. The north is, on the contrary, imagined as modern, entrepreneurial, full of opportunities, civilised, and developed. This use of the category ignores the fact that pockets of poverty and disparity, often associated with the 'underdeveloped' south, exist both in the north and the south, emerging from the conditions of exploitation imposed by global capitalism.

On the other hand, the concept of the south has been read as one which – like the use of ‘third world’ by the Non-Aligned Movement and the Bandung Conference – offers a powerful intellectual tool for actors who conceive themselves as being subaltern in global networks of power. The category of the ‘south’ may therefore be helpful if our goal is to acknowledge and highlight profound inequalities in the distribution of wealth and power, which have resulted from a long history of colonial projects driven by the north. It recognises a shared history of colonialism and neo-imperialism across an abstract set of geographical spaces and actors, as well as multiple traditions of solidarity, resistance, and challenges to neoliberal reform. In that sense, the term global south is useful in mobilising resistance and creating dialogues and solidarity between scholars, activists, and intellectuals from all over the world – see, for example, de Sousa Santos’ approach to the World Social Forum as a manifestation of a large-scale project of resistance and struggle against neoliberalism.



As much as the emancipatory fantasy of the ‘south’ provides a language of struggle, resistance, and mobilisation, it does not seem to have much to offer in terms of leading to a radical break with the colonial structures in which the north-south dichotomy is embedded.



Behind both the readings of this concept, despite their significant differences, rests a different fantasy of the south. It may be argued that reclaiming the concept of the south, from an emancipatory perspective, may lead to the mobilisation of a whirlwind of creativity in the imagination of alternatives to capitalism. However, although these utopian fantasies seem to offer a “refreshing playground for unsettling old and unfair ordering systems”, I believe they lack capacity to generate

meaningful transformations of our political, social, and intellectual imagination. As much as the emancipatory fantasy of the 'south' provides a language of struggle, resistance, and mobilisation, it does not seem to have much to offer in terms of leading to a radical break with the colonial structures in which the north-south dichotomy is embedded. As Palomino notes, citing Nietzsche, the binary always ends up producing a "motionless picture of immutable values and eternally similar meaning".

A new language

Schneider, following Fanon, argues that what we need is a new language that goes beyond the dichotomy, one that may be effective in catalysing transformation, rather than only mobilising it. Education could certainly play a key role in the construction of such a language by stepping outside of the dichotomic vocabularies of Western epistemic traditions: it could consolidate spaces for meaningful, horizontal, and heterogenous dialogues among different epistemic traditions in line with what Mbembe, Sousa de Santos, and others have referred to as 'pluriversal' knowledge.

But this seems like a herculean task. Perhaps a starting point is to engage in more careful, detailed, and complex ways of *naming* and describing the issues and phenomena that we wish to study. In line with the spirit of solidarity that animates the 'southern' emancipatory project, we could use more explicit and specific names and labels for the shared experiences of oppression, exploitation, inequality, and forceful integration into neo-imperialist projects that manifest differently across the globe. In that sense, instead of taking the fantasies of the south for granted, our role in the construction of a new language may start with dismantling them, and committing to more relational yet contextual approaches to the impact of globalisation, which may reveal the ways in which our multiple experiences are interdependent and intertwined. This may allow us to maintain links of solidarity and recognise a shared history of subjugation to colonial projects, while also avoiding the risk of oversimplifying the role of unequal power structures and their diverse impact throughout history in each local context. This, in turn, may help us see, with more clarity, the ways in which the contradictions of global capitalism have unfolded in particular contexts, paying close attention both to the general logic that drives them and to the particular historical, cultural, and institutional factors that have produced specific instantiations of those tensions.

Main image: [Jametlene Reskp on Unsplash](#)

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