

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

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*Since the 1970s, the countries of the Global South have sometimes struggled to express themselves politically. In **The Poorer Nations**, **Vijay Prashad** analyses the failures of neoliberalism, as well as the rise of the BRIC countries, and all the efforts to create alternatives to the neoliberal project advanced militarily by the US and its allies. **Lorenzo Ferrari** finds value in the book's accessible tone and content, as well as its interviews with leading players including senior UN officials.*



The Poorer Nations: A Possible History of the Global South. Vijay Prashad. Verso. March 2013.

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A history of the Global South told by a historian of the Global South: that is largely what makes *The Poorer Nations* a particularly interesting book. A thorough history of the Global South has been much needed up until this point in order to enrich the relatively scarce literature on the history of North-South relations. Many feel that this literature also desperately needs to be enriched by voices from the South. Now teaching at Trinity College, Hartford, [Vijay Prashad](#) is a decidedly left-wing scholar, and in his latest book he aims at providing “a possible history” of the Global South – one which might be partial indeed, but which is made more engaging thanks to the author’s passionate involvement.

The first chapter of the book is the only one to focus on “the North”. Prashad’s analysis shows how the Western industrialized countries’ approach to international politics and economics shifted during the 1970s from liberalism to neoliberalism. In the early 1970s, the Third World project challenged the existing international order thanks to increasing assertiveness and growing bargaining power. According to Prashad, the establishment of the G7 in 1974 was mostly meant to counter the challenge and to re-establish the North’s dominance: “the periphery needed to be put in its place”. Neoliberalism was established as the new ideology of G7 – neoliberalism being for Prashad “a fairly straightforward campaign by the propertied classes to maintain or restore their position of dominance”. Liberal thinkers and actors were sidelined; their last attempt at resistance being the Brandt Commission of experts in the late 1970s. The Commission envisaged a reformed liberal order informed by “global Keynesianism”, but its vision was too timid and too late to stop the triumph of neoliberalism.

To grasp an intense decade of developments in international politics and economics is not easy, but Prashad overall succeeds in the endeavour. The main weakness of his analysis lies in the downplaying of the many nuances and differences present within the North. The positions of the US administration play a major part in the picture proposed, but the North has been something more than the sum of Kissinger and Reagan – which some might regard as rather scary indeed.

The other three chapters of the book focus on the South and consider the initiatives taken by intellectual elites, governments, and social movements in order to counter or amend the neoliberal world order. Chapter 2 traces a history of the work of the South Commission of experts during the 1980s. The activity of the South Commission was indicative of the incapacity of the South to define a clear and shared strategy to counter neoliberalism. Preferences and goals were too heterogeneous for the South to effectively impact on the international agenda-setting and relegated it to a mostly defensive position. Some were pursuing people-centred development strategies, while others preferred growth-centred ones. A concessional attitude towards neoliberalism prevailed over a more confrontational one, and the resulting vision of “growth with equity” is regarded by Prashad as mere “neoliberalism with Southern characteristics”.

The chapter rests on previously largely unexplored material from the archives of the South Commission. However illuminating the work of the South Commission is on broader tendencies and issues, one wonders though whether the importance of such a work is not overestimated by the author. Its impact seems very limited indeed, and the same goes for the work of the Brandt Commission previously mentioned. A particularly striking aspect of the chapter is the almost complete absence of Cold War from the picture, which was not exactly a marginal aspect of the international history of the period.

In Chapter 3 Prashad focuses on Southern governments' initiatives of cooperation, in particular in the 1990s and 2000s. A number of Southern states experienced noticeable growth rates over the period, but economic strengthening was not matched by adequate political strengthening. Prashad is very critical of the objectives pursued by the South-South cooperation: "the mandarins of the South [...] simply requested more room in the system", and no alternative military, institutional and ideological tools were established. While the South remained overall ineffective, according to Prashad the attitude of the North towards it even worsened, and the US headed for "full-spectrum dominance of the planet". To relieve us from such a gloomy picture, the last chapter traces a history of "the South from below", i.e. the social movements fighting against neoliberalism all over the world. Prashad is extremely sympathetic in their respect, and his analysis is rather affected by wishful thinking – as the author himself seems to recognize, by calling the chapter 'A Dream History of the Global South'.

One general weakness of the book is the ambivalence of the focus. The coincidence between "the poorer nations" and "the Global South" hinted at by the title is problematic. It is not always clear whether Prashad wants to focus on the role and actions of the poorer nations in the recent international history, or if he rather wants to make a global history of the opposers of neoliberalism: in either case something is lacking and something else is marginal. Overall the fundamental arguments of the book are clear however, as is the structure. The reading is fully pleasant and it does not require deep previous knowledge of the subject.

Prashad was overall successful in producing an ambitious and challenging book on a complex and crucial subject. His book is a very much welcome contribution to the growing literature on the field. To be sure, Prashad's history is only one of the possible versions of the facts, but his passionate involvement makes the book truly stimulating and engaging.

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