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Review/Reseña

Vijay Prashad's *The Darker Nations: A People's History of the Third World*. New York: The New Press, 2006.

Vijay Prashad on the Idea of the Third World

Louis Segal

University of California—Berkeley

Animating Questions

One of the fundamental responsibilities of the historian is to probe into the past and distinguish the quixotic from the prophetic. Why do the struggles of the peoples of Huamanga in Steve Stern's *Peru's Indian Peoples and the Challenge of Spanish Conquest* resonate to today's sensibilities? Why do we still read C.L.R. James' *Black Jacobins* and the glimpses it gives of the liberating dialectics of the Atlantic world? Why do we revere E.P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* and marvel at the possibilities intrinsic to the fusion of the vision of William Blake with the bold actions of the artisanal followers of General Ludd? What is it about the struggles of the past, even those that seemingly dissolve in the acid vat of modernity, that still illuminate today's world?

This is the central question that animates *The Darker Nations: A People's History of the Third World* by Vijay Prashad. Prashad opens this

ambitious, sprawling essay with an elegiac definition: “The Third World was not a place. It was a project.” He then proceeds to describe the arc of the Third World project through an unusual but appropriate organizing principle. The book is composed of eighteen chapters broken into three parts (*Quest, Pitfalls, and Assassinations*). Each chapter takes an aspect of the idea and trajectory of the Third World and looks at it through the lens of a particular city or locale. Other than the opening two chapters and a chapter on Belgrade, the locales are articulating nodes of what was known as the Third World. The book is literally, and appropriately, all over the map as it follows a rough chronology from Brussels and the meeting of the League Against Imperialism in 1927 to Mecca and the strange alliance of Neoliberalism and atavistic fundamentalism in our own troubled times. Along the way Prashad illuminates, among other historical conjunctures, the Bandung Conference of 1955, the Tricontinental Congress of 1966 in Havana, the authoritarian turn in Algiers, the locus of the Sino-Indian territorial war, and the growing senescence of the Third World as the emerging nations’ new national elites cleave to citizenship within a global bourgeoisie and the poorer nations drown in the sea of debt and IMF-designed “structural adjustments.” In addition to providing deep structural analyses of this epoch, Prashad narrates this complex story with an engaging sense of indignation and a flashing wit. *The Darker Nations* is an ambitious and important work.

What is World History and how do we narrate it? In its telling, whose voices do we privilege and what archival sources do we use? Although World History has been taught in high school for a generation and although there are departments and programs in graduate schools that embrace the project, it still seems to me to be very much out of reach. We get closest to successful models either with very particular models (the Caribbean models of Transatlantic history by historians such as James, Laurent DuBois, and Robin Blackburn) or in the works of non-historians who engage with Big Picture questions (Sidney Mintz’ *Sweetness and Power* and Jared Diamond’s *Guns, Steel and Germs* come to mind). World History’s very scope and complexity and the difficult—if often only implicit—project of making a break from previous narrative conventions of

the nation-state and/or imperial systems make it more notable as a future model than as an accomplished school. Indeed, previous narrative models offer little guidance and the sheer immensity of the task often intimidate the working historian whose training and instincts all tend to the local and the particular. To attempt to master a global story, well, that's another task.

And yet no one can deny the importance of the task. Historians of the so-called "periphery" have constantly been confronted with the toxic limits of national histories and the distorting lens of "metropolitan" accounts of the world. Too often, despite theoretical apologia and assertions of agency, the engine of world history is finally located in the economies, politics, and cultures of the developed nations of the world. The developing world merely provides local color and nuance to a story scripted elsewhere. In the study of Latin America, for example, national histories obscure as much as clarify 19th century history. In the 20th century, too often the marrow of historical development is to be found in a bi-polar narrative. Latin America becomes a stage upon which global rivalries are played out. The intrinsic qualities of the area are secondary to the extrinsic. While social revolutions from Mexico to Bolivia to Guatemala to Cuba to Nicaragua to Venezuela sturdily declare their origins in the particular conditions of their region, history, and culture, and proclaim the primacy of multipolarity, metropolitan observers too often reduce events in Latin America to a bi-polar calculus. In the center of last century the story played out this way: the interests of the First World (the North Atlantic capitalist powers) are challenged by the Second World (the Socialist Bloc) and the area of contestation, hemispherically, becomes Latin America. Looked at globally, the area is the Third World (Asia, Africa, Latin America and Oceania) where proxy wars are fought and the destiny of the first two worlds will be decided on the bones of the third.

What is interesting -and vitally important to remember- about the typology of the Third World is that for several key decades in the twentieth century it was used not by empire builders but by empire-breakers to describe the project of a world in fundamental transition, a world moving out of its colonial and neocolonial bonds. The Third World did not denote a third-class historical presence nor a stage upon which history's big boys

would engage in yet another battle of the titans. Rather, it was a self-consciously articulated project where once subject peoples were finding a way out of the brutal imperial rule of previous centuries and entering into a world predicated on human solidarity, the dream of economic equality, and emerging systems of democratic mobilizations.

It is in this story of the rise and fall of the idea of the Third World, that Prashad engages in a direct and sustained way with the practice of global history. His engagement is not simply linguistic. Behind the ascendancy and dissolution of this *idea* of the Third World Prashad describes a *real* world whose stories have been often poorly told and lost in the ideological mists of the metropolitan Right and Left. While Prashad does not always succeed in the telling (his eye, cast towards the Big Picture, occasionally loses command of important details) his work is praiseworthy and worthy of emulation.

The project

Often obscured in conventional Western recensions, one of the central dramas of the two World Wars in the 20th century was the dismantling of old European empires and the rise of newly independent nations. By the end of the Second World War, this tendency accelerated and soon the term Third World began to be used in describing this global project. While it had been adumbrated both in W. E. B. DuBois' words in 1903 about the "problem of the twentieth century is the color line" and in Lenin's ideas about imperialism, it became, with the Bandung Conference in 1955, a fundamental factor in the post-War period. "A vast section of the world that had once bowed before the the might of Europe nows stood at the threshold of another destiny" (33). Ahmed Sukarno, addressing the twenty-nine representatives of newly sovereign Asian and African nations gathered in Bandung, articulated the grounds of unity: "We are united by a common detestation of colonialism in whatever form it takes. We are united by a common detestation of racialism. And we are united by a common determination to preserve and stabilize peace in the world" (34). To that end, the final communiqué at Bandung demanded all formerly colonized states be admitted to the United Nations. These were significant,

epochal words in a world rent by U.S. assertions of the “American Century” and the heating Cold War. Bandung was the first articulation of a Third World agenda and the conference would adumbrate a UN bloc that would shape to no small degree the next few decades.

In these same post-War years the UN Economic Commission for Latin America (ECLA), began to confront head-on the central economic challenge facing nations in the Third World.

After centuries of imperialism, the new nations had been left with economies that relied on the sale of raw material and the import of finished goods. This fundamental imbalance meant that (Third World)...countries had to export vast amounts of raw materials at relatively low prices whereas their import bills would be inflated with the high prices commanded by the industrially manufactured goods. (62)

This built-in structural inequality was, under the rules of the game, seemingly insurmountable. Arguing that the challenge could not be met without acknowledging the impact of colonial rule, Raúl Prebisch, the former director general of Argentina’s Central Bank and the head of ECLA, and other economists began to challenge not only the modernization theorists (who conveniently de-linked the imperial legacy from the technical problems of economic “take-off”) but also such foundational ideas of classic economic theory as “comparative advantage” and the “invisible hand.” With mordant if reductionist wit, Prashad sums up this rejection: “The darker world contributed greatly to the development of Europe, and based on this evidence it is clear that the invisible hand is white” (68). The emerging consensus coming out of ECLA centered around strategies to increase the rate of capital formation for industrial development in the developing world. To this end, tariff mechanisms, regional markets, and cartels of primary commodities were seen as key instruments. Describing this process Prebisch observed that “Industrialization was not an end to itself but the principle means of obtaining a share of the benefits of technical progress and of progressively raising the standard of living of the masses” (69). Developmentalist ideas, although ultimately insufficient, were adapted by many organizations of the emerging Third World and incorporated into the 1964 UN Conference on Trade and Development. They served as a vigorous counter-narrative to the ideas of modernization

championed by metropolitan intellectuals and served notice that the world was not bi-polar nor willingly subject to the fiat of the metropolis.

Politically the congeries of emerging nations and national liberation movements gravitated to representative forums in their struggle to find a common voice. Unlike the dominant international Communist organizations -now fracturing by the Sino-Soviet split and the emergence of different interpretations of socialist development in Yugoslavia, Algeria, Tanzania, Cuba, and Vietnam- “clear lines of demarcation” were not being drawn in the Third World. From the 1957 Afro-Asian People’s Solidarity Conference hosted by Gamel Nasser in Cairo and the first meeting of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) in Belgrade in 1961 to the Tricontinental Conference in Havana in 1966 to the 1979 meeting of NAM, again in Havana, there was a general agreement about the nature of the problems in the world. But beyond a mutual abhorrence of colonial and neocolonial economic structures and a belief that political, economic, and cultural cooperation was necessary among the developing nations, there were serious strategic disagreements.

Some of the disagreements were due to different ideological and cosmological understandings of the world, some were based on different economic circumstances and priorities, but Prashad argues that until the early eighties, the commonalities were greater and more compelling than the differences and to the degree the Third World spoke in a coherent voice international organizations such as the UN and international forums paid heed to this voice. Even the Super Powers had to acknowledge the collective power of this voice and their strategies had to take the agency of the Third World into active consideration.

Pitfalls

Prashad’s essay is not a celebration of the Third World; and while in many ways he speaks with admiration about both the vision and the actions of the architects of the Third World project, the history, ultimately, is a tale of a death foretold. From the beginning, he’s clear about this:

The Third World project came with a built-in flaw. The fight against the colonial and imperial forces enforced unity among various political parties and across social classes. Widely popular social

movements and political formations won freedom for the new nations, and then took power. Once in power, the unity that had been preserved at all costs became a liability. The working class and the peasantry in many of these movements had acceded to an alliance with the landlords and the emergent elites. Once the new nation came into their hands, the people believed, the new state would promote a socialist program. What they got instead was a compromise ideology called Arab Socialism, African Socialism, Sarvodaya, or NASAKOM, that combined the promise of equality with the maintenance of social hierarchy. Rather than provide the means to create an entirely new society, these regimes protected the elites among the old social classes while producing elements of social welfare for the people. Once in power, the old social classes exerted themselves, either through the offices of the military or the victorious people's party. In many places, the Communists were domesticated, outlawed, or massacred to maintain this discordant unity (xvii-xviii).

By the 1970s these new and old elites turned the Third World project increasingly to their own class interests. And it is in the second section (*Pitfalls*) of Prashad's book that this process is delineated.

Brilliantly using a chapter of Franz Fanon's 1961 *Wretched of the Earth* as a guide ("The Pitfalls of National Consciousness"), Prashad begins the second section of his book with a narration of the arc of Ahmed Ben Bella in Algeria, the demobilization of the Algerian population and the rise of an autocratic military government. These trends, Prashad points out, pervaded the Third World and in the next chapter, again employing Fanon, he traces out a similar revolutionary dénouement in Bolivia. In the following chapter, centered in the island of Bali halfway across the globe, Prashad describes another contemporary analog to this process that culminated in the bloody massacres of the Indonesian Communists in the wake of the overthrow of Sukarno. In all of these instances, Prashad traces out the transformation from a commitment to revolutionary nationalism based on principles of solidarity to an often cruel nationalism and retreat into invented and atavistic traditions. As this trend is consolidated in most of the Third World (Prashad devotes additional chapters to the border wars between India and China, the Petrocracy in Venezuela, and the collapse of the democratic agrarian project in Tanzania), Prashad neither spares the United States in its direct complicity with the rise of these class-based military autocracies nor the USSR or China from their shared culpability—by indifference and at times outright collaboration—in the

collapse of the “National Liberation States.” Indeed, one of the prime virtues of this book is how successfully Prashad reconstructs the world from the vantage point of the developing world, the Third World, struggling for air and sustenance on a planet that two other worlds insist on controlling.

Assassinations

By the the 1980s, Prashad argues, the weight of enormous foreign debts and the IMF-induced structural adjustments combined with the emergence of new elites within the Darker Nations led to the final stage of the Third World project. He opens the third section of his book with the 1983 meeting of the Non-Aligned Movement in New Delhi as Fidel Castro, the outgoing chair of NAM, passes the baton to India and Indira Gandhi. “New Delhi,” Prashad says, “allows us to write the obituary of the Third World” (209). Castro, already affected by the incipient collapse of the USSR and COMECON, appeals to the solidarity of the Third World and begins to formulate a strategy of a debtors’ cartel. Either the Third World pushes to cancel the crushing debt or the democratic processes in Latin America and, by extension, the Third World, will wither on the vine. While Fidel Castro is received with great enthusiasm in New Delhi, another voice, Sinnathamby Rajaratnam of Singapore, emerges as the harbinger of the new sensibilities more aligned with the dictates of neoliberalism and the “Washington Consensus.” The non-aligned movement, Rajaratnam argues, without a sense of irony, must align itself with the powers that be: “The policies that work best are those based on free market competition, with the government’s role limited to protecting the people against the heinousness and injustices unrestrained competition could inflict and redistributing the fruits of competition without deadening the competitive spirit” (211-12). Rajaratnam, Prashad says, “spoke for a rising class across the NAM states. Industrial, agricultural, and financial elites who gained through several decades of import-substitution policies now outgrew their training wheels and restraints” (212). The intellectual leaders of this movement were often schooled in the West and spent time in international institutions such as the World Bank and the IMF. They spoke in the name of India, the East

Asia Tigers, Brazil, South Korea, Mexico and Argentina. While Cuba would hold the high moral ground at the NAM Conference, these new forces were in the process of moving the material ground of the non-aligned into another world. These forces would play a “crucial role in the derailment of the Third World agenda” (215) as they actively collaborated with liberalizing forces in the Group of Seven (G-7), the most powerful industrial countries in the world. From here on, save for largely symbolic rhetoric directed towards support of the Palestinians and the anti-apartheid movement, the Third World would no longer speak in a strong and unified voice against the powers-that-be. Pace Cuba. Fidel Castro, quixotic prophet, reminded the NAM Conference that the “Third World, born in struggle, had to struggle to put its agenda on the table, and now had to struggle to realize it” (221-2). He was greeted with cheers -before the NAM delegates left the building.

So, how did this new collaboration between the First and the Third World work itself out on the ground? This process, of course, was accelerated with the collapse of the Second World and Prashad spends the concluding chapters of *The Darker Nations* detailing the derailment of the Third World agenda as he takes his readers to Kingston, Jamaica, Singapore, and Mecca. In Jamaica, we see Michael Manley attempt to help shape a bauxite cartel that would lead to greater advantages accruing to the bauxite-producing countries. This fails because of lack of solidarity among the bauxite-exporting countries. As a consequence, Manley’s attempt to construct a democratic socialism fails, Jamaica’s debt increases, the demands for structural adjustment become more insistent. Manley is soon replaced by a more pliable partner in the new, international neoliberal order. In general terms, by 1983, the trends were dramatic. “Capital flows reversed, as more money came from the indebted countries to the G-7 than went out as loans and aid. In other words, the indebted countries subsidized and funded the wealthy nations” (231). Voices of protest were raised in Kingston (The Terra Nova Statement), in Cuba, and in Tanzania (The Arusha Initiative) but they were not heard.

In the penultimate chapter, Prashad discusses the “Four Tigers” (Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea, and Taiwan) and the “Four Cubs”

(Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, and the coastline of China). No countries, he argues, were better placed by geography, circumstance, and colonial structures to adjust to the impending New World Order. And indeed between 1960 and 1990 the Four Tigers' share of total exports increased from 1.5 to 6.7%, their share of total exports from the Third World rose from 6 to 34%, and their share of the Third World manufacturing exports rose from 13.2 to 61.5% (245). The World Bank issued a report on this titled "The East Asian Miracle." But a closer look at this "miracle" reveals sustained and concerted government assistance and great amounts of aid from the US. These mechanisms of the Seen Hand were certainly not invoked in the nostrums of IMF structural adjustments or the Washington Consensus; they were absent in the IMF scoldings the poorest nations of the world received as they were being restructured and, not surprisingly, they were conveniently underplayed in the World Bank's glowing account of the "miracle." Nonetheless, The Four Tigers, with Singapore in the lead, would play a pivotal role in the Non-Aligned Movement, delinking the political aspects of development from the technical: "(T)he construction of the 'miracle' enabled the Tigers to exert themselves in the NAM forums against the line proposed by Castro and the Left" (248). In this manner, the strength of the Third World project's political and historical analyses evaporated in the technocratic language of development. What we have here is not only the inability to communicate but the refusal to do so. And the consequences for the poorer nations were dire.

Debt hangs heavy for the bulk of the planet. In 1970, when the Third World project was intact, the sixty states classified as "low-income" by the World Bank owed commercial lenders and international agencies \$24 billion. Three decades later, the debt of these states ballooned to \$523 billion. An impoverished conversation on debt yields no agenda to combat this fundamental ailment for the former Third World. These are not "poor" countries. Over the course of these three decades, the sixty states paid \$550 billion in principle [sic] and interest on loans worth \$540 billion. Yet they still owe \$523 billion. The alchemy of international usury binds the darker nations (276).

Julius Nyerere chaired the NAM South Commission and in 1987 summed up the Third World project in this way:

(G)rowth and hope—then disillusionment... That hope has now vanished. For there was a gradual realization that such progress as

was made in the first three decades after 1945 did not imply any fundamental change in the status or real development prospects of Third World countries. Dependency was increasing rather than decreasing, poverty was persisting and the income gap between the Rich North and the Poor South was getting wider (277-278).

And this is, after some interesting remarks on the symbiotic relationship between religious fundamentalism and neoliberal prescriptions, how Prashad closes his essay. He gives us little about the possible re-birth of the Third World project. The growing rejection of neoliberalism, the emergence of new regional alliances in Latin America, Africa and Asia, the diminution of the role of the IMF and the World Bank, all are only cursorily alluded to in his concluding remarks. His mission, in this essay, is not to exhort us; rather, he is interested in re-creating the heady moments of the emergence of the Darker Nations in a world that, for a few decades, was passionately engaged in a project that augured a better, more democratic and egalitarian world. And in his illumination of this past, as we look at the present and contemplate the future, Prashad implicitly reminds us that there is reason to hope once again for a better world.

Exceptions

This is an important book. Again and again, as I was reading it, I was reminded of the audacity of the Third World project. I also learned a lot about events I thought I already understood. Prashad's bold analysis also made linkages that I had not considered between central events and conjunctures of the twentieth century. His contextualization -and skewering- of Samuel Huntington's corpus was impressive; his discussion of ECLA was pithy; and his neologic wit was refreshing. That being said, I have a few complaints.

Most fundamentally, I'd have liked to see more rigorous analysis of the often ambivalent relationship between the Second and the Third World. Because both worlds, in their 20th-century incarnations, were overwhelmed does not mean that their successes and failures should not be more fully examined. That is, I suppose, another book for another time. One interesting pioneering account of this relationship can be found in

Piero Gleijeses's book *Conflicting Missions: Havana, Washington, and Africa, 1959-1976* (2002).

My other major objection is that Prashad gets a lot of details about Latin America wrong. He wrongly says that South America achieved independence in the 18th century (80), that Guatemala's reforms from 1944 to 1954 were brought down when the "U.S. Marines landed" (106), that the MNR government in Bolivia in 1952 had "adopted a platform that was Communist but for the hammer and sickle" (134), that Hugo Chávez' golpe took place in 1999 (148), that Mexico's land reform under Cárdenas was "strikingly similar" to reforms in Vargas' Brazil and Perón's Argentina (314, fn.21), and, on several occasions, that Salvador Allende was killed or murdered (147, 240). While these incorrect characterizations do not fundamentally alter the strength of Prashad's project, they diminish it. In historical argumentation, the devil is in the details and when the details are wrong they, at best, distract the reader, and, at worst, cast doubt on the writer's methods and scholarship. Additionally, missing in *The Darker Nations* are such crucial Latin American figures to the development of the Third World project as José Martí, José Enrique Rodó, José Carlos Mariátegui, José Vasconcelos, Augusto César Sandino, Marcus Garvey, Erik Williams, C. L. R. James, Stokely Carmichael, Euclides da Cunha, Oswald de Andrade, Luis Prestes, Paolo Freyre, José María Arguedas, Juan Velasco Alvarado, Omar Torrijos, and, perhaps, Carlos Calvo and Luis María Drago. Surely, in terms of original thought and contributions many of these—and others—would shed light on the emergence of the Third World project. Writing as someone who has spent a good deal of his life being a student of Latin America it seems that as Greg Grandin argues in his book *The Empire's Workshop: Latin America, the United States and the Rise of the New Imperialism* (2006), much of the initial attack on the Third World project occurred in Latin America, and if there is to be a re-birth of the Third World its initial birth pangs have already been felt in Latin America. I might be being parochial but it seems to me that Latin America, beyond Raúl Prebisch, Fidel Castro and Che Guevara, might have played a more central part of Prashad's narrative.

These exceptions though are relatively minor and do not fundamentally diminish Vijay Prashad's fine account.