

## Review of Vijay Prashad, *The Darker Nations* The Rise and Fall of the Third World

Vijay Prashad's *The Darker Nations* opens with the assertion that the third world was not so much a place as a project. His goal is to provide an account of the anticolonial and nonaligned movement rather than a full history of the under-developed world in the last half of the twentieth century. However, in this remarkable book, he does both. Born in the wake of the upheavals of the Second World War, the third world movement that took form at the Bandung Conference in 1955 was championed by the likes of Nehru, Nasser, Tito, Sukarno, and Nkrumah. Its leaders collectively called for national independence, economic development, and Cold War nonalignment while basing themselves on the support of millions of followers in the under-developed nations. Brilliantly structured and written, Prashad's work conceives the story of the third world as a tragedy in three acts: "Quest," the heroic origins running into the 1960s; "Pitfalls," the growing ambushes and traps in the 1960s and '70s; and finally "Assassinations," the decline and fall in the last two decades of the century. These three sections are divided into successive chapters that tell a tale of many cities—Paris, Tehran, Cairo, Bandung, Algiers, Havana, Mecca, etc.—each of which illustrates one aspect of the history of the movement.

Paris is taken as the birthplace of anticolonial struggle in the post-1945 period. Tehran under Mossadegh is the locus of a discussion concerning the struggle for cultural modernity in the third world. Cairo in the early 1950s helps to describe the struggle for feminism in under-developed countries including those under Islam. Bandung (1955) represents the flowering of the Non-Aligned Movement, and Havana (1966) shows the climax of the revolutionary struggle of the third world. Algiers (1962), in turn, embodies the confiscation of the national liberation movement by the state bourgeoisie, while Mecca in the closing years of the twentieth century represents the final demise of the movement under the weight of oil money, neoliberal globalization, and Islamic fundamentalism.

Paris after the Second World War was the crossroads from which the third world movement was launched. Quickly turning its back on its own liberation, France launched colonial wars to hold on to its power over Madagascar, Vietnam, and Algeria. In reaction, in 1952 the Parisian journalist Albert Sauvy pointed to a "Third World" between the first and second worlds which was in the process of initiating a global struggle against colonialism. Three years later the Martinique Communist poet and intellectual Aimé Césaire denounced the barbarism of Western Europe and the United States, which were blind to the violence perpetrated against the peoples of the tropics.

In order to provide background to this emerging struggle, Prashad shifts the scene briefly back to the roots of twentieth-century anti-imperialism. The League Against Imperialism Conference at Brussels in 1927, organized by agents of the Communist International, becomes the focal point for Prashad's discussion of the emergence of third world nationalism in the wake of the First World War and the Russian Revolution.

Prashad then makes his way to Bandung where the Non-Aligned Movement was conceived mainly by Nehru, Sukarno, and Nasser. He then moves to the Afro-Asian People's Solidarity Conference (1957) held in Nasser's Cairo where only five years earlier monarchy and patriarchal Islam reigned supreme. In what must be considered one of the highlights of the book, Prashad sketches the relationship between third world feminism and radical nationalist movements. Although far from exhaustive, Prashad's research opens up the possibility of a more comprehensive understanding of the largely forgotten role of women in national liberation movements. His recall of the plenary address of the Egyptian intellectual and journalist Aisha Abdul-Rahman at the conference is especially instructive for us who live in the days of Islamic fundamentalism. According to Abdul-Rahman,

historians of national liberation movements have often ignored the central role played by women in them and the liberation of women which comes about through involvement in the struggle. Imperialism confined women to ignorance, isolation, and slavery. For all their machismo, Abdul-Rahman concludes, the national liberation struggles are forced to mobilize the mass of the population opening up liberating possibilities for women. In Nasser's Egypt, women registered important advances according to Prashad. But the feminism that developed never achieved the status of an autonomous movement and remained tied to the state.

The Islamic world also is the site for a brilliant discussion of the quest for a distinctive third world modernity during the heyday of radical nationalism. In a chapter entitled "Tehran" Prashad describes the cultural ferment in Iran which followed in the wake of Mossadegh (1951–53). At this time the pre-eminent Iranian man-of-letters, Jalal Al-e Ahmad, produced a major critique of Western cultural imperialism and its negative effects on artists and intellectuals cut off from the cultural practices of the Iranian people by the allure of the West. This discussion of the plight of Iranian culture becomes the launching point for an insightful overall analysis of the dilemmas facing traditional societies historically oppressed by European political and cultural domination. In these years, as Prashad demonstrates, third world intellectuals conducted a wide-ranging discussion on the question of creating new cultural forms or re-invigorating old traditions linked to the energy unleashed by the anticolonial struggle. Nationalism had to be based on a respect for diversity within the state and had to be linked to the cultural achievements of other nations especially in the under-developed world. How best to promote education and literacy was at the forefront of the debates on the relationship between culture and development. Critical to these discussions was the question of the power of European rationalism and science. There could be no question of turning one's back on these products of the European Enlightenment. Jalal Al-e Ahmad among others was aware of the need to engage with these elements of modernity by integrating them with Iranian cultural practice.

At Bandung in 1955 the leaders of the movement declared their intent to stay clear of the Cold War struggle dividing East and West while demanding international disarmament and peace based on a strengthening of the role of the United Nations. Called together in defense of the Vietnamese revolution, the Tri-Continental Conference in Havana a decade later affirmed the need for armed struggle in the pursuit of national liberation. Indeed, Prashad shows that in these decisive years of the movement, the third world developed a core political program around the values of disarmament, national sovereignty, economic integrity, and cultural diversity.

But there were worms in the bud. Starting with the contradictions that enveloped the Algerian revolution, Prashad, in a masterful way explains how the third world ran into a series of stumbling blocks that ultimately undermined the project. Having achieved a historic victory over French colonialism in 1962, the Algerian National Liberation Front (FLN) turned itself into a state dictatorship cutting itself off from the peasantry and working class. Like so many other third world regimes, the FLN under Ahmed Ben Bella proceeded to centralize power in the state, enforce its own monopoly over politics, and demobilize the mass of the population whose support had been critical to national liberation. Socialism was imposed from above rather than from below, enabling an emergent state bourgeoisie to seize control of the economic surplus and appropriate it to its own purposes. When Ben Bella attempted a last minute rapprochement with the left in 1965 he was removed by the army, which from then on became the main pillar of the regime.

Chapters in the "Pitfalls" section illuminate the role of military coups and dictatorships in third world countries (Bolivia, 1964), the foibles of radical nationalism and third world Communist parties (Indonesia, 1965), the rise of "mystical nationalism" and the growth of wasteful military expenditure (the Indian-Chinese War, 1961), and

the catastrophic effects of petroleum on the internal development of third world countries (Venezuela prior to Chávez). “Pitfalls” concludes with a nuanced analysis of Julius Nyrere’s program of state-directed agrarian socialism (Ujumma) which ended as an exercise in political authoritarianism and economic failure.

The final section of the book, “Assassinations,” narrates the rise of the new bourgeoisies of South and East Asia (New Delhi and Singapore). Kingston, Jamaica then serves as a case study of the ravages of neoliberal structural adjustment while Mecca becomes the ultimate citadel of third world wealth and religious fanaticism. Prashad’s litany of failure: lack of democracy, political exclusion of peasants and workers, failure of land reform, bureaucratization, military takeover, corruption, ongoing economic dependency on the West, the rise of new bourgeoisies, the onslaught of neoliberal structural adjustment, and the emergence of ethnic and religious extremism, is exemplary. Especially impressive in this concluding section is Prashad’s class analysis of the step-by-step recovery of the old elites and the emergence of new state and entrepreneurial bourgeoisies in the under-developed states whose predominance spelled doom to the project of the third world.

Prashad’s discussion of the economic dilemmas facing third world countries is easy to understand and convincing. Particularly appreciated is his examination of Rudy Prebitsch’s ideas of import substitution and his discussion of the formation of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development. Yet, it is disappointing that he did not choose to include a discussion of dependency theory as developed by Paul Baran, Paul Sweezy, and Andre Gunder Frank. The role of imperialism in structuring a permanent state of dependency had an enormous resonance during the heyday of the third world movement. This view continues to be highly pertinent in the epoch of neoliberal globalization and dependent industrialization.

Prashad’s treatment of the role of the Soviet Union and the People’s Republic of China under Mao leaves something to be desired. Anti-imperialism and anticolonialism are fundamentally Leninist conceptions. It was the Comintern which promoted these ideas in the inter-war period as Prashad notes and it was these same notions that the socialist states supported in the post-1945 years in so far as they were able. It would have been helpful if Prashad had discussed this reality in more forthright terms. Indeed, a more up-front and extended discussion of U.S. opposition to the political and economic agenda of the third world would be helpful.

It is true of course that both the Soviet Union and the People’s Republic of China were less than perfect models of socialist principle and this came to be mirrored in the distortions and contradictions in their foreign policies. It would have been instructive, to cite one example among many, if Prashad had examined in greater depth how Moscow ideologically justified its support for the Baathist Arab nationalists over the interests of the Iraqi Communist Party. Or what sense of desperation led Mao to champion the absurdity of the Three Worlds Theory. Even so, one can seriously ask whether there would have been a third world project at all without the support of these two socialist states. It is noteworthy that the project’s collapse more or less coincided with the decline of the Soviet Union and the disappearance of Maoism in China.

Prashad’s failure to engage sufficiently with the two Communist giants leads to some misconceptions. Thus, in his treatment of the Bandung Conference he portrays the two powers as already at loggerheads in 1955. In fact, the break between the two only began a year later in the wake of Khrushchev’s secret speech against Stalin. Both states endorsed the line of nonalignment adopted at Bandung—the Chinese more spectacularly with the appearance of Zhou Enlai at the Conference itself. When discussing the Tri-Continental Conference in Havana, Prashad leaves the impression that the Soviet Union and China were not doing enough to support the Vietnamese struggle against U.S. imperialism. It is true that the two powers were quarreling and their lack of

unity hampered assistance to the Vietnamese. However, their very rivalry and competition may have spurred each to step up their military and economic support. But there can be no doubt that Soviet and Chinese aid was instrumental to the defeat of both French and U.S. imperialism.

More disturbing than Prasad's treatment of the Soviet Union and Mao's China is his rather dismissive treatment of revolutionary Cuba. At the Havana Tri-Continental we are told Cuba put the cult of the gun on the table. This hardly does justice to Cuba's role in the third world. Failure to suppress the Cuban Revolution in 1961 led more or less directly to the disastrous U.S. invasion of Vietnam four years later. Cuba served as a vital lynchpin between the third and second world. As such it facilitated the flow of support from the Communist states toward national liberation movements while helping them to maintain their independence. The Tri-Continental Conference hosted by Cuba was not merely a symbolic rallying of support on behalf of the revolutionary war in Vietnam at the height of the sixties. It was rather the coming together of the nations of the three under-developed continents in political solidarity, an event which had long-term positive implications. It is true that this courageous little island's example of revolutionary guerrilla warfare was largely thwarted in the short run when applied to the revolutionary struggles of Latin America. But its long-term economic and social achievements and ongoing defiance of U.S. imperialism undoubtedly inspired the "pink" revolutions that have since swept Latin America. Its military as well as technical, educational, and medical assistance to the liberation movements in Africa in the 1970s proved to be of incalculable importance.

Prasad himself attributes the ultimate failure of the third world movement to its lack of a class perspective. Its leaders believed that to fight colonialism and imperialism a unity of political parties and social forces was necessary. In the wake of independence they attempted to reinforce that unity by means of state power. Instead of galvanizing the peasants and workers against the bourgeoisie and landlords, they suppressed these popular forces in the name of state-directed development. Prasad ignores the fact that Cuba did not make that mistake. It maintained a principled commitment to the idea of class struggle and socialist revolution as key to human development. Surely the question of Cuba is more than that of putting the cult of the gun on the table.