

Marxism and the Third World:  
Challenging Imperialism to 1968 and 2008  
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Though usually traced to Alfred Sauvy's (1952) suggestion that newly independent 'underdeveloped' Asian and African countries constituted a 'third force' between capitalist and communist blocs, and though Mao opposed it to the imperialist US and the 'social imperialist' USSR after the Sino-Soviet split, the idea of the Third World is Marxist, albeit rooted Marxism's thinking about nations and national liberation which remains less developed than its thinking about class and class emancipation.

More than any other intellectual and political current, Marxism nurtured, supported, articulated, theorised and chronicled the Third World. And without it, Marxism is *Hamlet* without the Prince of Denmark. The Third World and national liberation have long vexed Marxism, proliferated its disputatious strands and exposed its limitations. World revolution always entailed extra-western social and national revolutions and, as reforms sated western working classes, exciting and often, as in China and Vietnam, stunningly effective, Marxist theory and revolutionary practice in the Third World moved centre-stage in Twentieth century Marxism. Their common challenge to imperialism reached a climax in 1968, as the US suffered reversals in Vietnam, and continued to the 1974 demand for a New International Economic Order (NIEO).

However, thereafter, the theorization of imperialism in Marxist discourse was replaced by a disparagement of 'Third worldism' as a romanticization of the political possibilities which the Third World did not have and a consequent demand that Marxism return to focus on class issues, specifically those affecting the capitalist core of the world economy. Ironically, just as the left was executing this turn, the Third World began asserting its centrality. The new century found many Third World countries growing fast. However, the only Marxist ideology that adorned this, arguably even more effective, challenge to imperialism was that of the Chinese communist party-state.

This essay examines the trajectory of the relation between Marxist theory and the Third World, beginning with its origins in Marx and Engels and Lenin's anticipation of the 'three worlds' idea. It argues that the Russian and Chinese revolutions moved the Third World and national liberation to the centre of Marxism and its ideas and forces were prominent in decolonization and the Third World's political and economic assertion that culminated in the 1960s and 1970s. The penultimate section deals how this link was broken and the conclusion reflects on what might conceivably restore it today.