

A MESSAGE FROM THE EDITOR

"TWO WORLDS SOON TO BE THREE?"

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The last few editorial messages have meditated on the apparent disintegration of the United States in the twenty-first century. The list of problems is long and quite frankly depressing. In economic terms, we bear witness to staggering levels of domestic inequality with its twin faces of abject poverty and obscene wealth concentration. We must also determine how to reconstruct an economy built on the weak foundation of unregulated markets, dubious financial instruments, and, above all, extreme debt secured by nonexistent assets. To describe this shaky economic structure, we might borrow from Karl Marx the term fictitious capital. At the global level, the US government's abandonment of long-standing trade agreements and the precarious place of its currency—long recognized as the preferred medium of global exchange but backed since 1971 only by a gradually dwindling supply of confidence—have introduced a level of uncertainty unfamiliar to almost all Americans alive today.

In political terms, the near-total abdication of the United States in matters of global leadership, symbolized by its withdrawal from numerous multilateral accords related to climate change, human rights, and nuclear disarmament, portends disaster. These external changes are coupled with disturbing cultural shifts within the nation's increasingly fortified borders, particularly the growing toleration and even outright embrace of hostility toward populations in the minority of racial or ethnic identities, faith traditions, sexual orientations, and national origins. This disheartening state of affairs did not originate in the last couple of years. Rather, it has set in over decades, as insidiously as cancer, in processes too complex to discuss here. More often than not, both the citizenry at large and the political class that purports to represent it have opted to nurture the disease along rather than attempt to cure it. Now, under the regime

of an individual who has upended long-cherished political norms in a remarkably short time, it has reached a level of malignancy that will be difficult to reverse.

There is a growing sense among those who have been critical of US domestic politics and foreign affairs that all of these problems have been a long time coming, that they represent a comeuppance of sorts for an accumulation of injustices committed in the name of American values. Some might even be tempted to root for the failure of the world's lone remaining superpower. There is a dangerously naïve zero-sum logic to this line of thinking, for the global South does not stand to gain at the expense of the relative good fortune of the global North. Rather, the two are connected together by mutually dependent circuits of production and commerce. So it is not a zero-sum game. Things are never that simple.

Still, the frequency and intensity of abuses the United States has perpetrated against the global South seems to have increased since the midpoint of the twentieth century. Disastrous military engagements, from the quagmire of Vietnam half a century ago to the long chain of CIA-sponsored coups d'état and lethal military dictatorships across the nonaligned world during the Cold War to the illegal invasion and occupation of Iraq in the last few years, have become a lamentable specialty of the United States. What has been missing in recent decades is a commitment to more positive forms of international engagement. There is simply nothing on the order of the Marshall Plan, the Alliance for Progress, the Peace Corps, or the Fulbright Program in this era (the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief, or PEPFAR, initiated by the George W. Bush administration and continued by those of his successors, is a notable exception that may, unfortunately, prove the rule).

With regard to Latin America, it seems that the current crisis in Venezuela has reawakened the historical ghost of hemispheric interventionism, which has lay mostly dormant since the Cold War, although Haiti, Panama, and Nicaragua provide notable exceptions. There is little doubt that Venezuela's current leader, Nicolás Maduro, is unsavory and to some extent illegitimate. Nevertheless, the US government's recognition of the political insurgency of Juan Guaidó, whose economic sympathies align with Washington's preferences, represents a dangerous meddling in the internal affairs of a sovereign state. In the American hemisphere, we've seen this story play out too many times not to know that it always has an unhappy ending.

Perhaps the longest shadow cast over the developing world is that of economic domination and exploitation. Institutions controlled by Washington, namely the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, require austerity measures and financial deregulation as conditions for receiving development aid or monetary stabilization. Such actions, usually heralded as a pathway to the abundance of the global marketplace (recall the Ronald Reagan administration's dictum of "trade, not aid"), have led to a widened global North-South divide, heightened inequality within high-income countries and developing economies alike, and seemingly insurmountable external debt.

Again, Venezuela proves to be an illustrative case. It was popular frustration with the hollow promises and negative by-products of free-market reform, after all, that propelled former president Hugo Chávez to power and that gave his so-called Bolivarian Revolution international relevance. Predictably, Washington bared its fangs and, once Chávez fell victim first to falling oil export revenues and then to cancer, sank its teeth in. This economic aggression has taken its toll. Prominent US economist Jeffrey Sachs, who during his long career has at different moments been either an enthusiastic supporter or an ardent critic of different facets of the neoliberal economic development model, has recently asserted that US economic sanctions, not domestic political malfeasance, have been chiefly responsible for the current state of chaos in Venezuela. The human cost, in his estimation, has been 40,000 otherwise avoidable deaths due to starvation, infectious disease, violence, and inadequate medical care.

Of course, Venezuela is but one case, albeit a particularly acute and troubling one at this moment, in the vast and diverse array of places in the global South. Yet it tells us a great deal: that the United States, despite its forfeiture of any plausible claim to global leadership, is still capable of flagrant intervention; that in spite of its obvious failures, macroeconomic decision makers continue to push the Washington Consensus model; that developing countries are resisting this imposition, some more successfully than others; and that the very concept of the global South is as relevant as ever, given the lopsided distribution of wealth across the imaginary North-South divide.

Into this jumble of factors enter China. As a recent article in the *New York Times* explains, China has seized on opportunities in the global South to expand its reach.¹ In Latin America and Africa, that has meant building massive infrastructure, increasing military ties, expanding trade relations, and providing governments with commodities-backed loans. At the risk of over-relying on Latin

America for reference points, I'll provide one more example from the region, this time Argentina. In that country, Chinese officials bailed out a flailing government and shored up a notoriously fragile economy in exchange for its military being given the right to build a massive space station in Patagonia. The purpose of the installation was to reach the far side of the moon. In January of this year, the Chinese government announced that its space program had done just that. The ultimate aim of pushing into this strange new frontier: to explore the possibility of extracting helium-3, a potentially limitless source of clean, renewable energy.

What are we to glean from these developments? First, the tectonic plates of global geopolitics are shifting under our feet. The details are entirely new but the patterns are a familiar reiteration of the Cold War. It is not inconceivable that a three-world order might emerge once again as China's star rises in seemingly equal and inverse relation to the US's setting star. The regions of the global South—for generations known as the "Third World," a shift in designation reflected in our own organization's name (this publication and its parent organization were named the Journal and Association of Third World Studies for decades)—may once again serve as the proxy conflict zones of shapeless, growing empires in competition with one another. Whether the states of the global South are able to turn this tripartite world to their advantage, to triangulate new superpower rivalries, remains to be seen.

Second, China is truly emerging as a global powerhouse, a process about which we have been warned since the reforms of Deng Xiaoping set China on its present course of rapid industrialization and global market integration in the 1970s. The recent consolidation of president Xi Jinping's power within the Communist Party's ranks, which has been unprecedented since the days of Mao Zedong, suggests plans for longevity and continuity in a system that is already notable for its stability. All this at the same time that the basic forms of governance in the United States seem most uncertain.

Third, and perhaps most important, China is clearly playing the long game on the matter of the climate crisis and the depleting supply of subsoil energy sources here on Earth. Setting up for the exploitation of a lunar energy source with no present market-ready outlet here on Earth may look like a losing bet to those who still see a bright future for petroleum and coal, but those people are almost always trapped in a model that is concerned only with the next quarter's profits. For those capable of long-range vision, it is plainly obvious that

control and exploitation of renewables will ensure not only national competitiveness but indeed human survival into the twenty-second century.

To paraphrase Vladimir Lenin, what is to be done? Lenin had practical aims in asking that question (specifically, he sought to promote his vision of how to foment class consciousness among Russia's workers through party organization and discipline). My aim, in contrast, is more rhetorical, not least because I have no good answer. All I know for certain is that the solutions to the problems discussed here—the ones that helped create and now perpetuate the North-South divide—begin with understanding them, and that requires in-depth study. That is where we come in, and it is to that task that we now turn.

NOTE

1. Ernesto Lodoño, "From a Space Station in Argentina, China Expands Its Reach in Latin America," *New York Times*, July 28, 2018, A1.