

# A MESSAGE FROM THE EDITOR

## RENEWING OUR FAITH IN GLOBAL SOUTH STUDIES

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In 2017 the Association of Global South Studies held its annual meeting in Marrakech, Morocco. A few days before the conference began, a group of six of us started our trip in the ancient city of Fes, about seven hours north of Marrakech by train. Almost immediately after setting down our luggage, we went to the rooftop of our riad just as the evening prayer began to blare over the loudspeakers installed inside the city's minarets. Looking down on the courtyards below, we saw people turning east, toward the Islamic holy city of Mecca, to kneel and pray.

The people we witnessed that evening reaffirm their faith every day. Through daily ritual, they reiterate their adherence to a faith that represents their collective morality, values, history, and identity. To one degree or another, it is the habit of religious people to do this. Unbelievers, though typically less bound to such rites, aren't much different—it is an important feature of all humanity that people not only possess core beliefs but also remind themselves from time to time of what those beliefs are (and, ideally, to question them and to have them challenged by others). This got me thinking: Do we do this enough in our intellectual lives?

Part of me thinks so. In many ways, the academic enterprise—the life of the mind, as it were—invites far more critical reflection and debate than does religion, with its dogma and canonical thinking. But another part of me thinks the opposite: that for all of our self-professed commitment to skepticism and criticism, we often find ourselves stuck in intellectual traps of our own making. It's not always clear why this happens. The philosopher Thomas Kuhn, most famous for coining the phrase “paradigm shift,” argued with regard to scientific thinking

that basic internalized norms tend to confine the thinking of scientists, such that their work continually reinforces the boundaries of the paradigm. In his view, only periodic wholesale rejections of conventional wisdom break down those boundaries, leading not only to new discoveries but also to new ways of thinking. The process then starts over, until new thinking becomes old thinking and another rupture occurs.

The creation of paradigms is not necessarily a bad thing. Whole scholarly traditions and schools of thought have formed around a few accepted truths, and plenty of breakthroughs have occurred within existing paradigms rather than in opposition to them. To put it simply, paradigms at their worst have a tendency to throttle original thinking, but at their best they can guide and structure it. The key to maximizing the positive and minimizing the negative is constant questioning of the framework—its logic, its shortcomings, its blind spots. Failure to do so represents a kind of intellectual complacency, even laziness. I think that such an exercise would be fruitful for Global South Studies, since it is, in my view, fair to say that it is a paradigm in its own way.

All of us involved with this journal, or its parent organization, the AGSS, intuitively understand what the idea of the “global south” means. And all of us, by virtue of that involvement, believe in the value of using it as a framework of analysis. But do we pause enough to revisit the question of what the global south is? Social scientists (and, perhaps to a lesser degree, historians) are obsessed with definitions. Understanding cause and effect requires deep analysis of multiple variables and their relationships with one another, and that begins with defining them. Yet it is my impression that the framework itself, the global south, is often used in a rather reflexive, uncritical way. The global south becomes the capital-G, capital-S Global South, a concept reified into something that is fixed, universally understood, and real, rather than something that is fluid, constantly debated, and constructed.

This is not to say that there is *no* discussion whatsoever on the topic of just what the global south is. For example, scholars are not in consensus over the question of the global south’s origin. Working backward: proponents of world-systems theory, with the sociologist Immanuel Wallerstein as their leader, posit that the seventeenth century inaugurated a world divided between a prosperous core and an impoverished periphery. Others move the needle back further. The year 1492, with the triumph of Catholic Iberia over a rising Islamic tide and the initiation of the transatlantic maritime system, is an obvious candidate. The

historian Robert Marks looks to the prior century, the fourteenth, to assert that many of the features of global society commonly ascribed to Europe—trade, the rise of nations and empires, and so forth—can be found in Asia earlier. And then there are those scholars who take the longest possible view, finding the origin of our divided world in the Neolithic revolution ten thousand years ago, when humans first adopted some of the most elemental aspects of civilization: settled communities, specialized production, accumulation of capital, market-based trade, and the like. From there, one can simply conjure a long timeline: the rise of guilds and eventually unions, conflicts over resources, stark divisions of wealth, degradation of the environment, and the grouping of humans into tribes, races, ethnicities, and nations that fight to control finite resources and assert power over one another.

Origin stories can be dangerous in historical analysis; just about everything in the human world can be traced back to these early forms of human social activity, much in the same way that almost everything in the physical world can be traced back to the Big Bang. But regardless of the exact periodization or details that one might emphasize, scholars have at least been able to agree that somewhere around the midpoint of the last millennium, humans began to develop a world that we recognize as modern (a term that carries its own baggage, to be sure), and that one of the defining features of the modern world has been its cleaving into roughly two socioeconomic realities. That process has in turn created a long list of by-products on the less fortunate side of that divide, among them unstable and authoritarian politics, vulnerability to external aggression (mainly by the global north), environmental destruction, and, of course, extreme poverty. And the force behind this entire constellation of realities can be summarized in one word: capitalism.

It therefore stands to reason that a good deal of Global South Studies concerns itself with the development and expansion of the global capitalist system. Within that framework, scholars have emphasized either those things that have facilitated the proliferation of capitalism, or those things that have in some way resisted or inhibited it. Topics in the former category include massive global processes such as colonialism, imperialism, slavery, genocide, and the like. They also include the development of institutions that have propelled capitalism's rise: financial consortiums that ensure stable currencies with reliable exchange value in global markets; insurance industries that hedge the risks of commerce; and banks that provide the credit necessary to pursue more growth.

Scholars of the global south have devoted just as much attention, if not more, to those modern historical processes that have mitigated global capitalism, and they have tended to do so in a more politically sympathetic way. Topics in this vein include national liberation movements or social revolutions organized around concepts of anticolonialism, anti-imperialism, or Marxism, as well as historical processes involving the rise of labor unions and struggles to expand the rights and improve the working conditions and material existence of the poor.

The cultural turn in the last quarter of the twentieth century and up to the present day has reoriented Global South Studies toward issues of identity, inclusion, and social justice previously left out of class-based analysis. To that end, global south scholars have examined the global (or, in more up-to-date parlance, transnational) issues related to feminism, racial equality and justice, environmental concerns, LGBTQ rights, the climate, and a host of others. Sociologists and others have often utilized the term “new social movements” to describe post-Cold War mass mobilization around issues other than social class distinctions stemming from the inequities of industrial capitalism.

The varying scales and scope of analysis within Global South Studies gives our field a double edge: its most appealing quality is how capacious it is. We see that even during the annual AGSS conference. One presentation might be devoted to the poetry of the Persian intellectual Rumi, and the next to the French government’s integration programs for African migrants. The downside is that the purpose of such a broad field can get muddled.

To cite another, more personal example: I am currently reading an excellent study, titled *Restitching Identities in Rural Sri Lanka: Gender, Neoliberalism, and the Politics of Contentment*, on the lives of young women working in textile factories in one of Sri Lanka’s Free Trade Zones as they navigate between their traditional village existence and their occupations in an enormous global commodity chain. At the same time, I have just begun to peruse a new book with the cheekily ambitious title *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity*. Each, in its own way, is a natural fit within the larger framework of Global South Studies—the latter by virtue of its enormous temporal, geographical, and topical scope, the former because it deals with the ways in which global processes are brought to bear on a relatively small number of people in a local setting. Those processes include penetration by foreign capital and production methods, insatiable global demand for the products in question, and the

replacement of a traditional moral economy defined by bonds of reciprocity with a modern political economy held together only by the logic of the free market.

Ultimately, I find the idea that two works of such vastly different character both have a home within Global South Studies to be appealing, though that still leaves unanswered the question of how to define the field. So here is my answer: The field is a framework of analysis of human conditions in one or more of the areas of the world that have been negatively affected in social, economic, and political terms by the historical processes by which a global capitalist system has come into existence. While there are seemingly endless possibilities in terms of the scale, scope, topic, or discipline of study, research within Global South Studies should contain some acknowledgment of this general framework.

I would be hard pressed to find three people at any AGSS conference who would agree with that definition, and part of the fun of being in such an organization is debating ideas like this. To that end, the *Journal of Global South Studies* welcomes high-quality submissions from authors who make a case—*any* case—for inclusion of their work within the framework of Global South Studies, as they define the field on *their* terms, not mine. The goal, after all, is to avoid the straitjacket of intellectual complacency by applying constant critical reflection and debate, to reaffirm our faith in Global South Studies by actively challenging it rather than passively accepting it. I look forward to continuing that effort in the years to come with the AGSS and JGSS.