

Three Worlds?

We often hear poor countries referred to as “Third World” nations. Where does this terminology come from? Do the world's people really live in different worlds?

First World

The concept of the First World first originated during the Cold War (the decades long tension between the US and USSR), where it was used to describe countries that were aligned with the United States. These countries were democratic and capitalistic. After the fall of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, the term First World has come to be largely synonymous with developed countries regardless of their style of government.

First World countries in general have very advanced economies and very high Human Development Indices. On the other hand, the United Nations defined the First World on the wealth of the nation's Gross National Product (GNP). The definition of First World is now less concrete than during the Cold War.

Global dynamics between the First World and the other Worlds were essentially split into two. Relationships with the Second World were competitive, ideological and hostile. Relationships with Third World countries were normally positive in theory, while some were quite negative in practice (e.g., wars). Present inter-world relationships are not so rigid, although there is a disparity in terms of the First World having more influence, wealth, information and advancements than the other worlds.

Globalization is an increasingly important phenomenon which has been fueled largely by the First World and its connections with the other worlds. An example of globalization within the First World is the European Union which has brought much cooperation and integration to the region. Multinational corporations also provide examples of the First World's impact on globalization, as they have brought economic, political and social integration in many countries. With the rise of the multinational corporation, the problem of outsourcing has risen in many First World countries.

Second World

The term "Second World" is a phrase that was used to describe the Communist states within the Soviet Union's sphere of influence or those countries that had centrally-planned economies.[1] Along with "First World" and "Third World", the term was used to divide the nations of Earth into three broad categories. In other words, the concept of "Second World" was a construct of the Cold War and the term has largely fallen out of use since the "Autumn of Nations" in 1989, though it is still occasionally used to describe countries that are in between poverty and prosperity, many of which are communist and former communist countries today. Subsequently, the actual meaning of the terms "First World" and "Third World" changed from being based on political ideology to an economic definition (see the terms developed country and developing country).[1]

Third World

The term "Third World" arose during the Cold War to define countries that remained non-aligned with either capitalism and NATO (which along with its allies represented the First World), or communism and the Soviet Union (which along with its allies represented the Second World). This definition provided a way of broadly categorizing the nations of the Earth into three groups based on social, political, and economic divisions.

"Third World" refers to the economically underdeveloped countries particularly in the Middle East, South Asia, Latin America, Africa, and Oceania, considered as an entity with common characteristics, such as poverty, high birthrates, and economic dependence on the advanced countries. French demographer, anthropologist and historian Alfred Sauvy, in an article published in the French magazine *L'Observateur*, August 14, 1952, coined the term Third World, referring to countries that were unaligned with either the Communist Soviet bloc or the Capitalist NATO bloc during the Cold War. His usage was a reference to the Third Estate, the commoners of France who, before and during the French Revolution, opposed priests and nobles, who composed the First Estate and Second Estate, respectively. Sauvy wrote, "Like the third estate, the Third World is nothing, and wants to be something," He conveyed the concept of political non-alignment with either the capitalist or communist bloc

A number of Third World countries were former colonies and with the end of imperialism many of these countries, especially the smaller ones, were faced with the challenges of nation and institution-building on their own for the first time. Due to this common background many of these nations were for most of the 20th century, and are still today, "developing" in economic terms. This term when used today generally denotes countries that have not "developed" to the same levels as OECD countries, and which are thus in the process of "developing". In the 1980s, economist Peter Bauer offered a competing definition for the term Third World. He claimed that the attachment of Third World status to a particular country was not based on any stable economic or political criteria, and was a mostly arbitrary process. The large diversity of countries that were considered to be part of the Third World, from Indonesia to Afghanistan, ranged widely from economically primitive to economically advanced and from politically non-aligned to Soviet- or Western-leaning.[2] An argument could also be made for how parts of the U.S. are more like the Third World.[3] The only characteristic that Bauer found common in all Third World countries was that their governments "demand and receive Western aid" (the giving of which he strongly opposed). Thus, the aggregate term "Third World" was challenged as misleading even during the Cold War period.

Three Worlds Theory

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	Cold War Definition	Modern Terminology
First World		
Second World		
Third World		

