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Colonialism, Independence, and the Construction of Nation-States

Forrest D. Colburn

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"Why have some poor countries remained "underdeveloped," or even "failed," while others have become richer and stronger? In the successful group, have a few—notably China—enhanced methods long used by European imperialists to extract national resources from weaker countries? Has solidarity among poor countries ended? What does the future hold for poor countries? For compelling answers to these questions, read Colburn's *Colonialism, Independence, and the Construction of Nation-States.*"

—Lynn T. White III, *Professor, Princeton University, New Jersey, USA*

"Colburn's *Colonialism, Independence, and the Construction of Nation-States* is both an enlightening and enjoyable read. It is wide-ranging yet enlivened by telling examples."

—Michael Doyle, *Professor, Columbia University, New York, USA*

"Forrest Colburn's *Colonialism, Independence, and the Construction of Nation-States* is in part, and most significantly, a welcome attempt to revisit the history of basic ideas from the past, that should not have been shelved. Development, Third World, colonialism, North-South, are notions that surfaced in the sixties and seventies, and faded under the influence of excessive enthusiasm for "emerging markets" in the new century. Colburn explains splendidly why the history of these notions, and their content, is more relevant than ever."

—Jorge Castañeda, *Former Foreign Minister of Mexico, and Professor, New York University, New York, USA*

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Abstract This extended essay is a meditation on the evolution of the status of the many poorer countries of the world and, just as importantly, on how they are best understood as a collective entity. What gives the countries of the world with low per capita incomes a commonality is not just a similar material status, but above all a shared history: these many countries were assaulted, overrun, and sometimes even formed by European colonialism, which began in the fifteenth century and extended until World War II. All corners of the world were dragged into a global system of production and distribution but with a peripheral status. Colonies were not just poorer—a relative term—in comparison with the European nation-states, but they were subordinate, too.

Keywords poor countries · independence · development · poverty · nation-building · state-building

This extended essay is a meditation on the evolution of the status of the many poorer countries of the world and, just as importantly, on how they are best understood as a collective entity. What gives the countries of the world with low per capita incomes a commonality is not just a similar material status, but above all a shared history: these many countries were assaulted, overrun, and sometimes even formed by European colonialism,

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which began in the fifteenth century and extended until World War II. All corners of the world were dragged into a global system of production and distribution but with a peripheral status. Colonies were not just poorer—a relative term—in comparison with the European nation-states, but they were subordinate, too.

Most European rule in the Americas ended in the late latter eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. However, the wave of accessions to legal independence in Asia, the Middle East, and Africa between the end of World War II, 1945, and 1965 was broader, more extensive, and so of extraordinary importance. Membership in the United Nations more than doubled in these two decades. The context of this establishment of independence was the "Cold War": a frosty, threatening confrontation between two powerful blocs, one led by the United States, committed to the institutions of democracy and capitalism, with the second bloc led by the Soviet Union, devoted to the socialist organization of economies and governance. Most newly independent countries in Asia and Africa, and peers in the Middle East, strove to distance and differentiate themselves from these two blocs, and so becoming known as the "Third World." In time, the countries of Latin America and the Caribbean joined, loosely, the fold.

The former colonies of Europe perceived themselves in solidarity with one another, of having a political and economic kinship, and a shared mission. Rising aspirations were both domestic and international. The former colonies were inevitably poor, sometimes desperately so, and often "backward," steeped in traditions perceived as being inimical to processes necessary for the generation of wealth, such as, prominently, industrialization. Leaders felt their populations needed to be mobilized and educated, and that states built. A key concept, used across geographical regions and cultures, was "development." The rush was to move from being "underdeveloped" to "developed": to achieve economic parity, which seemingly was equated with political—and even cultural and moral—parity with the wealthier countries of the world. There was an intoxicating confidence and determination—a sense that everything was possible, above all with the right political convictions and organization.

In the international arena, there were widespread desires among the leaders of the newly independent states to foment solidarity among the poorer countries and to redirect international debates—and resources—from the "Cold War" to a discussion of what came to be called "North-South." (Wealthier countries were concentrated in the Northern

Hemisphere; poorer countries were concentrated in the Southern Hemisphere.)

Intellectuals and policy-makers in the wealthier countries joined the chorus, helping, ironically perhaps, to solidify—or even coin—terms, concepts, and even public policies. Enormous amounts of resources, intellectual as well as material, were vested in the bid to promote the development of the poorer countries of the world. At times, the motivation was strategic, but in other instances there was an academic engagement or even genuine empathy. Among educated elites, throughout the world, the status of the poorer countries was frequently a charged, even emotional, political issue.

A half-century later, the world looks different. The "Third World" is a term still used, but without evoking pride, solidarity, or militancy. Interest, intellectual and otherwise, in spurring development, of ending poverty and backwardness, has faded. Concerted efforts to establish a "new international order" have withered. Concerns are elsewhere. There is today a different worldview, a distinct *mentalité*. This change is prevalent everywhere, from Washington to Havana to Brasília to Paris to Accra to Cairo to New Delhi to Beijing to Manila.

The poorer countries of the world have made uneven progress. Many countries in Asia, above all China, have made striking gains, with strong states, coherent national identities, advances in social welfare, clusters of industrial strength, and a strong presence in international trade. Still, some states in Asia, ranging from Afghanistan to Bangladesh to Laos, have not fared well. In most of Latin America, there has also been enviable progress, although in fits-and-starts. However, the region remains overly dependent on the export of raw materials, with many destined now for Asia. In Africa, home to fifty-four sovereign states, progress has been uneven and largely disappointing. Some countries, ranging from Ghana to Botswana to Kenya, are faring reasonable well, but other countries on the continent are so weak, unstable, and poor that they are judged "failed states." Countries in this group include Sierra Leone, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (formerly Zaire), and Somalia. Even relatively successful African countries, though, have not been able to escape dependence on the export of raw materials; broad-based economic development has been elusive. Many countries of the Middle East have been overwhelmed by wars and sectarian conflict. The region stays afloat chiefly by drawing on its large petroleum reserves, a considerable share of which is now destined for export to Asia. Thus, there has been a

considerable diversity of outcomes among the poorer countries of the world in what was once a shared bid to engage in nation and state construction, and to promote economic development. There was always considerable heterogeneity among the poorer countries of the world, but the heterogeneity has become more pronounced and obvious in the last half-century. Relationships among the poorer countries, particularly with China, have become complicated.

The disparate fortunes of the poorer countries of the world in their efforts to pull themselves up to some kind of parity with the wealthier countries have undercut solidarity and also even an interest in studying and directing development as a shared enterprise. The poorer countries of the world, like their wealthier counterparts, are today atomistic. There has been a surprising resurgence in nationalism. Moreover, faith has withered in the possibility of stimulating development with the right ideas and policies. There are doubts—or at least confusion—about how to steer the direction of a poor country. There is seemingly a widespread sense of a pre-ordained fate: that some countries will progress, while others stagnate, and still others will implode. If in the poorer countries of the world the dominant *mentalité* was previously a benign socialism, today it is fatalism or even nihilism. The poorer countries of the world, certainly at least among those which have been less successful, have lost their confidence in how to progress, and even whether they can progress. Their compass is shattered. And they are alone.

In the richer countries of the world, interest in the poorer countries of the world and in their welfare has largely evaporated, and so has any sense of responsibility or obligation to those less fortunate. Moral clarity is missing. Instead, there is a *laissez-faire* attitude—or even a sense of competition for markets (which has links to employment). Ironically, perhaps, compassion for the poor of the world has weakened with increased trade, international tourism, and migration. The poor of the world are no longer so distant—and that has generated unease in the more prosperous countries of the world.

Concomitantly, intellectuals—in both the richer and poorer countries—have largely abandoned the study of development. Its place as a subject has been largely subsumed by the study of "politics" (which nonetheless invokes little passion). Previous efforts at studying development—as a "social science" project—are now looked at as "quaint," "misguided," hopelessly naïve, or even something akin to nineteenth-century missionary work. There continues to be useful work done on

specific problems of poverty, including notably on health care and agricultural productivity, but sweeping inquiries into nation- and state-building, and of economic development, have all but disappeared. All the heady books, studies, and reports earlier written with such earnestness about development are ignored, even seen by some as embarrassing.

This intellectual morass has been more damming because the poorer countries of the world have largely failed in building durable political institutions to mobilize and channel public participation in nation- and state-building. Labor unions, civic organizations, and political parties, often so important in the struggle for independence from colonialism, have come and gone. Absent nearly everywhere has been a capacity for rejuvenation. In many of the poorer countries of the world, the initial period of independence was accompanied by both charismatic, talented, and morally responsible leadership and widespread political mobilization. Sometimes inspiring leaders held on to power and slowly became self-important and self-indulgent. More frequently, second- and third-generation leaders have neither been as inspiring nor as responsible. Organizations offering a voice to the public have been allowed to ossify or have deliberately been dismantled. The poorer countries of the world likewise proved unable to construct enduring international institutions of any import. The lack of leadership and institutions (other than those of state bureaucracies performing specific tasks) has made the ideological void of the era even more pernicious.

There clearly is a dialectical relationship between passionate convictions and dreams, and the building and nurturing of public organizations, including prominently political parties. In the absence of faith, there is often only petty self-interest. The lack of an ideological compass in the poorer countries of the world goes hand-and-hand with the withering of organizations to channel public mobilization. Likewise, the absence of an inspiring ideological construct retards—or derails—noble leadership.

Without an inspiring set of aspirations to provide orientation, the governments of the poorer countries of the world are disparate. Some countries have well-meaning leaders, who strive to do the best they can on many fronts, from promoting economic growth to ameliorating poverty. Others, though, foment nationalism or even ethnic chauvinism to mask shortcomings in solving trenchant problems. Others resort to populism, and a few are just naked opportunists, monopolizing political power to further their own narrow interests. Members of the polity, who should be "citizens" (in the nineteenth-century definition of the term), are left

to fend for themselves as best they can; there is today—throughout large swarths of the world—little faith in states solving what are, in fact, collective problems of the nation. Instead, there is commonly a resort to individual solutions—prominently migration and immersion in religion. Just as this is an era of atomized states, so it is an era where the individual alone is responsible for solving his or her problems, even if it entails abandoning one's nation-state.

In sum, the world has evolved rapidly in the last fifty years. There are still rich countries and poor countries, but, again, the poorer countries of the world are more heterogeneous, more atomized, less sure of how to progress, less able to mobilize and channel resources, and less likely to receive support, intellectual or material, from the wealthier countries of the world (who are preoccupied with their own problems). As the director of an international organization funding programs to help the less fortunate quipped, "If you are a poor country today, you may be in the news, but no one is coming to help you." Imperialism has largely (though not completely) faded, but still the world seems more competitive, meaner than anticipated at the dawn of the independence era, and, furthermore, the poorer countries of the world have less inspiration and direction. It is an era of circumspect political imagination. The redemptive possibilities of politics are now seen as limited.

The novel coronavirus, SARS-CoV-2, which causes the infectious disease COVID-19, put in stark relief that while the many countries of the world are more than ever intimately linked economically, they remain independent political units. The novel coronavirus emerged in China in late 2019. In March 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared it to be a pandemic. It was alarming how quickly, and destructively, it spread throughout the world. Yet the desperate responses to subdue the novel coronavirus were at the national level, with every country doing the best it could on its own. Foreign assistance from wealthy countries to the poorer countries of the world was negligible, practically non-existent. The many poor countries of the world were left to fend for themselves, not even being able to count on the cooperation of neighboring, similarly impoverished, countries. Cooperation, even nominal solidarity, was elusive. There was a common problem in the world, but not a common or shared solution. This sad state-of-affairs should stimulate discussion about the role and responsibilities of nation-states in the international arena. Such discussions cannot evade

the schism between wealthy and poor countries—and the myriad of challenges confronting economically less prosperous nation-states.

It is a formidable, and risky, challenge to unsettle long-held assumptions about the poorer countries of the world and to advance propositions about their evolution. The safest tack is to eschew identifying patterns and just to assert that all of the countries of the world are heterogeneous. There is a saying in Spanish: "*Cada cabeza es un mundo*" (Every person is a world). Countries are enigmatic; no two countries are alike, just as no two individuals are the same. That approach, though, is facile and not useful. With all of the risks acknowledged, I proceed in this study to delineate consequential ways in which the poorer countries—as a loose collective category—have evolved over the past half-century and what are their defining characteristics today.

Just when the writing of a book begins is always unclear. This work clearly had a long gestation, one out of proportion to its length. A pensive colleague told me that scholars are forever marked by their first project. This quip is certainly true in my case. I began my study of politics with an examination of the Sandinista Revolution in Nicaragua. Post-revolutionary Nicaragua offered a window into the possibilities and difficulties of effecting change in a poor country, but it also provided, too, an example of how fashionable ideas, or perhaps better put, a murky *mentalité,* shaped political decisions, ones that nonetheless had to confront painful constraints. I then embarked on a study of revolutions throughout the "Third World," published as *The Vogue of Revolution in Poor Countries* (Princeton University Press, 1994). That study was enriched by time spent in Cuba, Ethiopia, Vietnam, and Burma, as well as by my prolonged residence in Nicaragua. Subsequently, most of my work has been in Latin America, including prominently in the five Central American countries, plus Ecuador and Peru. This work in Latin America over the years has been facilitated through a long-standing tie to the management school INCAE (previously an acronym but now the formal name of the institution). I have also benefited from consulting work carried out over many years in the region offered to me by the offices of the International Labor Organization (ILO) in San José, Costa Rica, and Lima, Peru.

I have read widely, too, facilitated by academic appointments at Princeton University and the City University of New York (CUNY). I use libraries, and the university libraries of the United States are without parallel. Still, my understanding of the status and dynamics into the

welfare of the poorer countries of the world is indelibly refracted by the considerable time I have spent in Latin America.

I am grateful for the opportunity to have spent a sabbatical as a member of the School of Social Science at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton. I participated in a seminar titled "The 'Third World' Now." The Algerian diplomat, Lakhdar Brahimi, joined our discussions and his insights and views were most enlightening and encouraging. The outline of this study took form at the Institute. Helpful comments on earlier drafts of the work were provided by: Anne Carayon, Martha Sofia Cifuentes, Arturo Cruz, Colombe de Nicolay, Murray Grigor, John Ickis, Philip Johnson, Atul Kohli, Federico Manfredi, A. James McAdams, Nick Micinski, Stephen Oduori, Andrea Prado, José Luis Renique, Julette Sánchez, Xavier Totti, Alberto Trejos, and Norman Uphoff.

The writing of the book was interrupted by my desire to test the claim that the commodity boom which began sometime around 2002 would not end, and that the economic growth in China, India, and other Asian countries had led to a permanent resettling of prices for commodities widely exported by Latin American, African, and Middle Eastern countries. This boom led to economic growth in many of the poorer countries of the world, and even a sense that some of them, such as Brazil, had "turned the corner." However, as I anticipated, commodity prices ultimately fell, beginning in 2012, revealing the continuing fragility of the economies of many of the world's poorer countries. The end of the long commodity boom, now called the "super cycle," also exposed the vacuum in thinking about how the poor countries can progress, both in absolute terms and relative to the wealthier countries of the world.

The need for economic, social, and political development—of different kinds of progress—in the poorer countries of the world remains pressing, even urgent.

It is necessary to find another compass to guide the poorer countries of the world. Existing ideological constructs—the "left" and the "right"—have become so overworked, so hackneyed, that they are no longer useful. Likewise, the emphasis on "formats" or "institutions," such as elections, contracts, and markets, has also become stale. Indeed, a new vocabulary is needed to reimagine possibilities, as well as strategies for achieving desired outcomes. Recent political protests in poorer countries, from Tunisia to Indonesia to Guatemala, suggest that in the absence of any compelling ideology demands are for basic values: protection of rights and of dignity, for fairness, and of governors working responsibly and with