

Solarz, M.W.: The Language of Global Development. A misleading geography. London–New York, Routledge, 2014. 181 p.

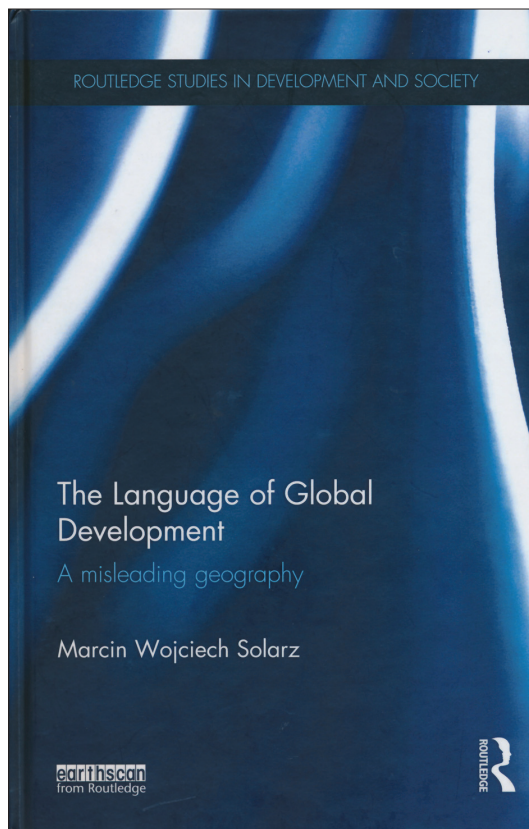
In the last few decades an intensive scientific discourse has emerged about the meaning, notion and measuring of the process of development. The term itself is rather problematic to define, and there are many theoretical questions related to studying development that need deeper knowledge to be deconstructed. One of them focuses on the various spatial terms used by scientists and politicians to describe and divide the world according to the social, cultural and economic differences between countries. No doubt that these topics are considered very relevant nowadays.

We are living in a world with huge and, in some sense, even growing inequalities, where powerful spatial metaphors like developing and developed countries, North and South, First, Second and Third World are used to describe these differences and the spatial pattern of inequalities. As Alberto VANOLO mentioned in his analysis on geographical represen-

tations of the world system (2010), these terms play a fundamental role in shaping our knowledge and building our personal imageries. Paraphrasing the language of J. BAUDRILLARD (1983), these 'hyper-realities' (representations) are often more determining than 'hard facts' in influencing our actions. Some use these terms as synonyms, however, not bearing in mind that they comprise different theories and have been embedded in the discourse on development due to various historical events and in different political contexts. That is why the subtitle of the book is very suggestive and signs the existence of debates about world development and its interpretations. To go further, illustrating these issues on world maps with a mass of labels often results in different explanations.

As SOLARZ's book clearly shows, the practice of how to classify and label the regions of the world is complex, difficult and challenging, and has been changing over time. The author who is associate professor at the Faculty of Geography and Regional Studies at the University of Warsaw, clearly, coherently and critically looks at the origins and meanings of the different terms and notions that have surrounded the global development discourse over the past few decades. The book consists of five main chapters, where the first four are about the roots and explanations of the different spatial terminologies discussed above.

Chapter 1 reviews the main discourses about the origins of the main concepts on the global divisions of development. Furthermore, it follows a chronological line from the early historical periods to the latest century and its 'Big Bang' (the author's words) in the terminology of spatial development. Yet, this chapter differs from the following ones, since it mainly focuses on differences of development in the world in an historical perspective rather than the genealogy of the terms used to label various countries and country groups. SOLARZ traces back the history of world development to the Palaeolithic Age, where the control of fire "was the first real, substantive global divide in terms of differences in development levels" (p. 6.). In the author's interpretation there were two universal warps that determined world history, thus, the global development of society. These were the Agricultural and the Industrial Revolutions. But he also emphasises that the early divisions of development resulted in atomised, local 'nano-worlds' and a fragmented world community, the exact locations of which in the world map we have no precise knowledge about. Still in the first chapter Solarz



discusses the changing developmental divisions from the Industrial Revolution to nowadays. At first he refers to the GDP estimates of Angus Maddison to demonstrate how the developed and underdeveloped parts of the world have changed over the past centuries.

Another important issue is to compare through maps how historically and recently used terms and concepts have divided the world, and to what extent they correspond to each other. While soon after the Industrial Revolution the dynamics of industrialisation as process marked the centres of development, then divisions were not identical with contemporary ones. Despite the socio-economic differences in the nineteenth century, some scholars, mostly with a postcolonial viewpoint, link the process of underdevelopment to the process of colonisation, arguing that colonial dependence has negatively influenced the development of these areas.

These theories had much influence on the development discourse, which they dominated through the 1960s and 1970s. Still in the first chapter SOLARZ discusses the main historical events of the twentieth century that have shaped the classification and labelling of the countries of the world. The end of World War II, the rise and spread of communism, the rivalry between the USA and the Soviet Union, and the emergence of new independent countries led to new classifications of the world system. (SOLARZ calls this phenomenon ‘the terminological Big Bang’, p. 50.) However, it was never unambiguous how to attribute the countries to various groups. The Second World, for example, which the author gives an extensive portrayal of, was rather a political than a socio-economic category from the very beginning. While it was a part of the tripartite division of the world system, it kept its political character. It was identified with the countries of the Eastern bloc and was never referred to as a less developed category than the First World. (As SOLARZ puts it: “the communist world also wanted to be regarded as a highly developed community [...]” p. 37.) Later on, as the notion of development has become globally problematised, and the meaning of development has changed, many international organisations, such as the IMF, World Bank and UNDP, prepared their own divisions based on different criteria.

The longest part of SOLARZ’s book (Chapter 2 and 3) is about the origins and meanings of the ‘Third World’, and it presents a critical debate on the concept. Since its introduction by Alfred SAUVY in 1952, the explanation of the term has not been unproblematic. At the beginning it was considered a political label referring to the non-aligned countries during the Cold War rivalry between the USA and the Soviet Union. (‘Third World’ was, thus, a synonym for ‘third force’ or ‘third way’ based on the notion of the ‘third estate’ in the French Revolution). To demonstrate the complexity of vari-

able meanings, SOLARZ argues in the second chapter that the term appeared in literature and journalism at the end of the nineteenth century with a completely different meaning from those used after World War II. The underlying concept and the term itself, however, were centrepiece of keen scientific debates, especially in the 1960s and 1970s. For the category ‘Third World’ started to be used in another way associated with the ‘underdeveloped’ or ‘backward’ world. Solarz discusses clearly and in great detail how the concept has changed over time, and what critiques it evoked almost immediately after its birth.

Some critics argued for rejecting the concept itself, because in their view it suggested the existence of a single, unique and cohesive World, while ignoring its diverse character and content. Thus, the relevance of the ‘Third World’ as a large aggregate was put into question. Other scholars suggest, however, that if we wanted to reject the term because of its diversity, than, as the author mentions, we would also have to remove all other generalising concepts from the language of geography, saying that “terms such as ‘Third World’, as every general category, will always distort and simplify reality” (p. 91.).

As mentioned before, some scholars connect the term to the process of decolonisation, putting equal sign between the former colonies and the colonial legacy on the one hand, and the Third World on the other hand. But this is misleading if we think on Thailand or Ethiopia, where colonisation was never complete, or on Canada and the United States, which were colonies at one stage or another in their history. As the author underscores in a separate subchapter (“Is the term still valid and useful?”), another important and relevant problem with the concept is that according to many, the end of the Cold War has made the term irrelevant, since with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the fall of socialism the former Second World does not exist anymore. While this kind of argument for the disappearance of the term could be valid, SOLARZ argues that the rumours about the end of the concept are exaggerated. In the titles of journals and books and the names of institutions one can still find the expression ‘Third World’. But the fact is that nowadays the term is mainly analogous with the underdeveloped, backward, and least developed countries. Therefore, when we are talking about it, we usually join it to socio-economic characteristics.

The last two chapters of the book contain an historical and critical overview of the ‘challengers’ (‘developing countries’ and ‘North–South divide’) of the former, often-used categories. Solarz argues that ‘developing countries’ seemed to be a positive category suggesting progress and improving situation, but in fact these countries showed the lowest level of development over time. Another explanation for the emergence of the term ‘developing’ was given by Gunnar MYRDAL, the Swedish Nobel laureate economist and

sociologist, whose work was connected mainly to economic and social theory. According to him, the shift to ‘developing’ from ‘underdeveloped’ was an outcome of ‘diplomacy by language’. This means that ‘underdevelopment’ is not a flattering description of the situation of poor countries, while the term ‘developing’ is much more positive and politically feasible. Besides, the concept of ‘developing countries’ was connected to certain trends in economic thought throughout the decades. In the lens of modernisation theory, which interpreted development as a linear, irreversible process universal for all countries of the world, developing countries must follow the path of developed countries. In other words, developed countries were claimed responsible for navigating and controlling developing ones. In this theory, developing countries were linked to the concept of ‘underdevelopment’, which neglected the optimism radiated by the term ‘developing’.

Later on, in the early 1980s the concept of a North–South opposition has emerged due to the former German Chancellor Willy Brandt. Although this categorisation had more controversies than others do, in the last 30 years “it has been reproduced in numerous publications ... with only minor changes, if any”, as SOLARZ puts it while discussing the usefulness and popularity of the term. Although terminological innovation has shown less dynamics since the 1980s than before, new categories and terms have still appeared to replace the already existing notion of the three ‘worlds’. Labels like ‘emerging markets’, ‘newly industrialised countries’, ‘Fourth’ or ‘Fifth World’ and ‘BRIC countries’ are still in use nowadays, and according to SOLARZ this present situation will continue in the foreseeable future. There will always be supporters and opponents, terms will be used and criticised, and new categories will appear. As inequalities still exist between the countries of the globe, geography will always need generalised labels to describe them. But in my view, we need to use these terms carefully, we need to look behind them and explore their theoretical and historical backgrounds, and see them in a global context.

That is why Marcin W. SOLARZ’s treatise is very impressive and suggestive. It gives a comprehensive and all-embracing overview of the main questions concerning global disparities of development during the last centuries, while discussing in detail the historical and conceptual framework of much used terminologies. The book is illustrated with several maps, which help the reader localise the mentioned ‘worlds’ and follow the main concepts and how they again and again regionalised the world in new ways. In my opinion, this work is addressed to and definitely required by those interested in the geographies and economies of global development.

For those who are interested in the aforementioned issues, SOLARZ’s book might seem different to

contemporary geographical works from Anglophone countries, since it tries to capture rather the practical than the theoretical questions and problems of global development. Furthermore, the volume examines these issues from an East Central European point of view, also referring to many authors from this region. Thus, it provides much space for relevant concepts and views barely present in international literature on the topic. It can serve as a useful tool in university teaching in all subjects related to these problems. It can help students understand how we regionalise the world, why we are doing it the way we are, why we use these labels, and how these concepts are related to development theories. With the multilingual and multidisciplinary bibliography one can find the most important and relevant sources on global development and spatial terminology. Students and teachers in the fields of geography, development studies, politics or history can be the main public of this book, but with its easily comprehensible content and readability it is offered for everyone interested in these issues.

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