

THE REAL THIRD WORLD

At the International Conference in Holland a spirited debate was engendered by the use, in one of the presentations, of the term "Third World." Considerable confusion seemed to accompany the term despite its common usage in the current global rhetoric. Is it strictly a political usage that signifies a nation outside the orbits of the East and West superpowers? Or is it economic, denoting a lower stage than the principal first two, a stage for which the euphemistic "developing nation" has replaced "underdeveloped" or "undeveloped" of the recent past? Or is the term social, frankly acknowledging a hierarchy of concern for different groups of people based on discriminatory bias of race, color, continent or simply polarized geography? The very notion of North-South dialogue seems to suggest the broadest bias of groupings with all the "haves" in the temperate and cooler zones and the "have-nots" linked in their torrid misery.

Foolish categorizations at best create the need for more of the same, with fourth, fifth and maybe tenth worlds to represent deeper degrees of despair. At worst the categories belie the enormous disparities within each of them, gaps as great or greater than those that divide rich and poor by region of the earth. The incidence of land tenure in the U.S. is no better than most of Latin America, commonly thought of as the "Third World." Conversely, the fabled riches of the powerful few in societies where poverty is the norm, match any display in the so-called Western World. Too often the attempt to focus on the world by numbers is to blind us to the fundamental inequities of access to natural resources wherever they persist and widen.

There may yet be room, however, for a genuine third position, not necessarily related to a region, society, an economy or even a particular politics. It is the position that recognizes the significance of freedom of access of all people to the gifts of nature and most especially the land.

"The present economic policy of the great powers is destroying riches without building anything in their place," the President of Brazil warned the United Nations recently. The press described the warning as coming from the "Third World," but Brazil, the biggest, richest and fastest-growing nation in its hemisphere, is too complex and dynamic for so convenient a category. As one of the world's biggest debtors, however, it is dependent on a healthy, global economy based, above all, on free trade. It is the monopoly access to resources, privileges aided and enforced by governments, that threatens the foundations of potentially prosperous countries like Brazil as well as the truly needy nations all over the earth. Until this fundamental truth is recognized, the whole world, first, second, third, and so on, will suffer the same fate.

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