

## Defining the Third World

Identifying the terminology to use when one groups together the states of Asia, Africa and Latin America is a difficult problem. The common shorthand has been to refer to these areas as the 'Third World', but this is a loaded expression that requires explanation as its meaning has changed over time. The term was popularized in the early 1950s by the French demographer Alfred Sauvy who used it to describe the poor Afro-Asian countries and peoples who belonged to neither the Western capitalist bloc, the 'First World', nor the communist bloc, the 'Second World', and which he saw, in an allusion to ancien régime France, as being equivalent to a disenfranchised global 'third estate'. Sauvy argued that, in time, this group would, like the 'third estate', demand that its voice be heard. With the attempt to move towards Afro-Asian solidarity in the mid-1950s, it appeared that this prediction had come true. However, with the emergence of a common economic agenda on the part of Asia, Africa and Latin America in the 1960s, the term came to refer not just to the neutralist states but to all countries struggling with the issues of dependency and underdevelopment, and its meaning began to broaden to include all of the post-colonial nations, no matter what their political stance. If anything, it is this economically derived definition that has lasted longest. However, even in this field its vague inclusiveness has proved problematical, for the states that made up the 'Third World' have had widely differing economic trajectories. For example, from the 1970s a number of countries in East and South-East Asia, such as Taiwan, the Republic of Korea and Singapore, saw rapid development, while at the same time some of the states in Africa, such as Burkina Faso and the Central African Republic, experienced negative growth. To put all of these states under the same label naturally seemed incongruous, and there was some talk of applying the term 'Fourth World' to the very poorest states. The expression has also become less useful since the end of the Cold War for the very good reason that much of the so-called 'Second World' became extinct. Moreover, those communist states that remained, such as the PRC and Vietnam, were the very ones that had already identified themselves with 'Third World' concerns. To a degree this problem has been addressed by the adoption of a phrase coined in the 1970s, namely to refer instead to these countries as the 'Global South', in contradistinction to the advanced economies of the 'North'. However, as with the 'Third World', this construction does little justice to the diversity of Asia, Africa and Latin America.