

South

The South is one of the four cardinal points. Like its opposite, the North, it enables definition of «latitude», between the North Pole and the South Pole, while East and West indicate longitude. These astronomical markers enable the coordinates of a point to be specified, giving the precise localisation on the earth's surface. However other meanings have been added on to this first meaning, which of course remains valid, so that today in common language the word is related to realities that are far removed from the initial meaning.

For Europeans, contrasting with the mist and cold of the North, the South conjures up sunshine and warmth. In France the word recalls summer holidays. The "autoroute du sud" (motorway to the South), takes holidaymakers from Paris southwards. Once it passes Lyon, where the landscape changes and the warmth heralds le Midi and the Mediterranean, it takes on the name of the autoroute du soleil (the motorway to the sun). In numerous European countries there is a "south effect" valorising the most southern regions for their relatively mild climate, for instance the south coast of the UK, sometimes referred to as the "riviera", or, in Germany, Bavaria and its sunny «landscape» to the eyes of people from the North Sea or Baltic regions. This is not so in the southern hemisphere, and the South has a negative connotation in Chile or Argentina. However, even for the inhabitants of the northern areas, the South may not always have positive connotations. Since the mild climate is thought to encourage relaxation rather than effort, the South can be perceived as a less productive space. Southern France, in addition to the distinction between the langue d'oc and the langue d'oïl (historically, the two large dialect groups), is seen as less industrial and less developed than northern France, a representation that has outlived the territorial dynamics that in recent decades have greatly altered the economic hierarchies inherited from the industrial revolution. In Italy, the South is called the Mezzogiorno (midday, as in the French Midi), poor and more vulnerable than northern Italy. There are obvious dangers in clichés of this sort, which condemn the South to inferiority in relation to the North. They are to a large extent untrue (in the USA the Old South is not well developed, but the Sun Belt attracts population and investment), and these clichés enclose the territories concerned in a sort of stalemate liked to place. This naturalisation of history recalls the highly inaccurate theory of climate propounded by Montesquieu, not far removed from natural determinism which has long since been refuted by classic geography.

On world scale, the South is used today in comparable manner, referring to a space that is less developed than the North. It is a substitution word, which appeared to replace others that had become obsolete. An awareness emerged of the fact that the phrase "underdeveloped countries" was arbitrary (for how can a boundary be defined between countries considered to be developed and others that are underdeveloped?) and of the scorn or condescendence that the phrase might convey. As for the phrase "Third World", it lost its substance (the notion of a "third" world confronting the geopolitical configuration dominated by two main blocks lost its meaning after the collapse of the Soviet Union, and in addition the countries making up this third world evolved very differently). There was therefore a need to coin a new terminology. It was in 1980 that Willy Brandt, the former German chancellor, filed the report of an independent Commission that he presided on the problems of international development, entitled "North-South: a programme for survival". A very approximate glance at the globe shows North America, Europe and Japan (an ensemble known as the triad) as concentrating power and wealth, so that the term South came to refer to the less «developed» parts of the globe. There is thus talk of the "North-South dialogue" to refer to negotiations between countries on unequal economic footing, and to call for cooperation between rich and poor countries.

Because it refers to a localisation, the word appears free from any derogatory connotation. It is perhaps its main virtue. But it still calls for reservations and comment. First of all, the expression is a sort of geographical metaphor, which has little in common with what is actually on the map. Countries purported to belong to the South are not all in the south, nor are all the countries supposed to belong to the North located in the north. The most obvious example is Australia: the only country whose name is related etymologically to its location in the (austral) south is a country belonging to the North, in the meaning used here, that is to say one of the rich countries. It can of course be conceded that language has conventions, and that words borrowed from this or that field of knowledge can provide new acceptations, subsequently validated by usage. The problem is that this can lead to error. Thus there is frequently a confusion between "countries in the Southern Hemisphere" and "countries in the South". Numerous countries belonging to the South are in the Northern Hemisphere - the two giants India and China, and many more besides (Mexico, the Caribbean, most of Africa, Pakistan, Bangladesh and the larger part of South-East Asia among others). The heterogeneous nature of the geographical ensemble referred to by the term "the South" should be underlined. It is not illogical that certain elements, without being completely identical, may be sufficiently alike to form an ensemble, which by definition is then distinguished from that which is outside. It therefore seems normal

that a term should be used to refer to that ensemble. But it is important not to discount the internal differentiations, to avoid giving the terms a meaning more specific than it actually is. In reality, the South groups countries with highly dissimilar levels of development. There are countries that the World Bank classifies as countries with low income (many of which are in Africa), and others with intermediate income. Several are the so-called "emergent" countries (Brazil, China, India, Mexico, South Africa etc.), with high rates of economic growth and already possessing a considerable industrial infrastructure. It is easy to see today the place that these countries are occupying on the international scene, both economically and politically. Thus the South is sufficiently diverse for preference sometimes to be given to other names – in French "les Suds", putting the emphasis on a plural reality, or in English the phrase "Global South".

«Development» generates new geographical configurations, and we can wonder if the South will continue to be an appropriate name. Probably not. Just as this word proved useful to approximate, although clumsily, a characteristic of the world at a given time, other words will in turn come to refer to new spatial ensembles, once the present hierarchies have been overturned.

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