The language of ‘emergence’, of emerging and frontier markets, is now so commonplace in print and news media that it has almost become an unremarkable term. But the ease with which commentators and analysts speak of ‘emerging’ markets (and their counterpoint, ‘mature’ economies in the Global North) reflects the successful relaunching of doctrines of linear progress that used to be organized under the language of ‘modernization’. Mid-twentieth-century development was oriented around ‘modernization’: a form of industrial catch-up whereby the colonized world would become just like (an imagined version of) mid-century America’s mass consumer society. The (white) Global North was the civilizational end point towards which former colonies should aspire. The fact that modernization theory is based on a fallacy – former colonies are merely ‘undeveloped’ because they have failed to ‘take off’ like America, and no attention is given to past and present forms of colonial extraction – has done little to soften its appeal in some quarters. But as ‘modernization’ and the end goal of 1950s America lost some of its sheen and relevance, ‘emergence’ took its ideological place. Emergence implies excitement, speed, growth and, in particular, the powerhouses of the Global South (including India, Mexico, Indonesia) where ‘world-class’ glass-and-steel financial districts are found in close proximity to underserved slums. But emergence also implies a form of catching up, of being late, of being behind, and has done little to shed the ideas of racial and civilizational hierarchy which previously lurked behind the language of modernization.

What – or rather, where – are ‘emerging markets’? Are they the same territories as those that might previously have been termed
the ‘Global South’, the ‘Third World’ or ‘developing countries’? Each of these terms carries a significant amount of baggage, and many of us are socialized into using one while deliberately rejecting the others. The term ‘Third World’ entered the English language in the 1950s as a way to differentiate (former) colonies from the capitalist ‘First’ and communist ‘Second’ worlds in the context of the Cold War. Some may be reluctant to use the term ‘Third World’, because it is so often used in a derogatory and racist way about supposedly ‘backward’ places that it has come to carry understandably uncomfortable connotations. But, as Vijay Prashad (2007) reminds us, the ‘Third World’ can also be understood as a project rather than a place; a project in which formerly colonized people came together in an attempt to chart a more just, postcolonial international economic order. Coalescing around the Asian-African Conference in Bandung (1955) and the First Summit of the Non-Aligned Movement in Belgrade (1961) this ‘Third World project’ also incubated demands for a ‘New International Economic Order’ (NIEO).

The United Nations General Assembly adopted the Declaration on the Establishment of a New International Order in 1974, calling for, among other reforms of the international, ‘The right of every country to adopt the economic and social system that it deems the most appropriate for its own development and not to be subjected to discrimination of any kind as a result’. The debt crises of the 1980s, and the imposition of Structural Adjustment Programmes through which governments were forced to privatize, liberalize and remove subsidies in exchange for International Monetary Fund/World Bank support put paid to the momentum behind calls for a NIEO. The ‘Global South’ too can be considered a ‘project’, as Prashad (2012) argues. Tanzanian independence leader Julius Nyerere formed The South Centre in 1995 to continue the struggle for an equitable international economic order that emerged at Bandung and Belgrade. At the time of writing, The South Centre has been active in fostering dialogue and putting forward policy proposals to counter the ‘Vaccine Nationalism’ adopted by states in the Global North, and seeking out reform to international intellectual property regimes that would facilitate global vaccine access (Sklair and Gilbert 2022).

The shift to a language of ‘emerging’ and ‘frontier’ markets came during the 1990s too, as employees of the International Finance
Emergence Corporation (IFC), the private sector wing of the World Bank, sought to ‘re-brand’ the ‘Third World’ away from the image of backwardness, corruption and poverty that they felt repelled the private capital needed for development. Yet, in seeking to ‘re-brand’ the Third World/Global South in this way, those IFC officials were betraying their own ignorance of the various projects oriented towards a just postcolonial international order which their organization had helped to undermine (Tilley 2018). The gradual displacement of the language of the Third World/Global South as memories of the Bandung moment and its spirit fade has left the financial media in control of our geographical imaginaries. The language and imagery of emergence (‘Asian tigers’, ‘African lions’, ‘The Next 11’, ‘The Frontier Five’) ‘capture and perpetuate the intensely competitive nature of international capital mobilization in the new pecking order of emergent nation states engaged in the race to outperform within the asset class of emerging markets, reminiscent of the analogous race for survival in the wilderness’ (Lakshminarayan 2017: 854).

African nations are subjected to a particular kind of othering through this financial discourse: Africa is either ‘rising’ or ‘in crisis’, most often ‘a combination of the two: Africa has the potential to rise if it can ever get itself out of crisis’ (Pierre 2018: 12). Images of African otherness circulate alongside a denial of African agency: what matters is the investment decisions made by external financiers, and their ‘risk appetites’. Ilias Alami (Chapter 10) explores the particular ways in which financiers investing in South Africa discount Black African rule and cast Black African workers as unruly and threatening to capital. At issue here is not merely the notion that racist representations repel much-needed investment. The power of finance is not merely in providing credit to those in need of it. Rather, what matters is that racist images shape the perception and calculation of risks by investors, and lead them to demand higher returns, given the ‘risk’ they allegedly face. The result is often a squeeze on labour and the state, while investors continue to paint themselves as the beneficent providers of capital that were imagined by the IFC when they rebranded the ‘Third World’ into a basket of ‘emerging markets’.

The rise of the ‘BRICs’ (Brazil, Russia, India, China – and sometimes South Africa) as economic powerhouses has added complexity to any map of the former ‘Third World’ or ‘Global
South’. Brazil has won several victories over the US and EU at the World Trade Organization, requiring powerful Northern nations to remove subsidies which made Brazilian sugar ‘uncompetitive’, and these rulings have been portrayed as victories for ‘the South’. But the extractive practices in which Brazilian mining firms like Vale are engaged in Africa seem to echo older forms of colonial extraction. The Brazilian sociologist Gilberto Freyre coined the term ‘lusotropicalism’ to reflect an assumption that there was something common about the mixing of Portuguese and African people in the tropics – whether Brazil, Angola or Mozambique. The quasi-privatized Brazilian mining giant Vale has attempted to invoke lusotropicalist solidarity despite significant opposition to its extractive operations in Mozambique. Chinese investment is also a significant presence in lusophone Africa, as Jon Schubert (Chapter 11) shows. Railways built by the Portuguese to facilitate extraction of ore to the South African coast have been revitalized for an ore-hungry China, but the promise of economic diversification that would come with the updated railway lines has yet to materialize. As Schubert reminds us, though, Chinese investment should not merely be misread as another stage of imperial extraction. Chinese investment in southern African rail infrastructure dates back to the TAZARA railway. Both the UK and the US declined to finance this railway designed to provide coastal access to Zambia, cut off by the apartheid and white minority regimes of South Africa and Rhodesia, and a peripheral Bandung spirit (or perhaps Cold War posturing) was leveraged to secure relatively condition-free finance from China in the early 1970s.

Linsey Ly (Chapter 12) takes us to China’s internal colonization of Inner Mongolia and the successive speculative visions for Han Chinese modernization of Mongolia that have resulted in a landscape littered with ghost cities and scarred by rare earth extraction. The rare earths extracted in China enable the functioning of magnets in wind turbines, photovoltaic cells and batteries in electric vehicles. The geological accident of rare earth concentration in China has led both the US Geological Survey and the European Commission to designate certain rare earths ‘strategic’ or ‘critical’ minerals: militarized energy security agendas are married to hopes for a ‘green capitalist’ future. Critical or strategic minerals are designated based
on a calculation of their importance to US/European economic futures (if we are to decarbonize transport, how much battery metal will we require?), combined with a measure of ‘supply risk’. Supply risk is determined by the geographical concentration of these ‘green’ minerals and the supposed level of risk for companies doing business in those territories, which turns out to be a measure of how likely mineral-rich countries are to set royalty and taxation rates that can fund public spending on infrastructure and social welfare (Gilbert 2020). Here we find ourselves looping back into Alami’s concern with racialized imaginaries informing measures of ‘risk’ in emerging markets. What would it take to empower a former colony to ‘adopt the economic and social system that it deems the most appropriate for its own development and not to be subjected to discrimination of any kind as a result’, as envisioned by the NIEO? Perhaps it would require disrupting the stranglehold that financial media have on defining our geographical imaginaries, as well as a careful engagement with what it means to seek out minerals that are ‘critical’ to greening the Global North.

Works cited


