

The Economics of Racism

KEYAN G TOMASELLI AND RUTH TOMASELLI

In any country, a myriad of connections exist between the political, social, communicative and most fundamentally, the economic aspects of a nation. It is the latter process, the base of the political economy, which inter-relates with and has a significant impact upon the superstructural elements of the political, ideological and the legislative aspects of a social formation.

A striking feature of the contributions in this issue, which deals with Third World Film Industries on three continents, is their similarity of colonial and neo-colonial experience. With the exception of India, all the industries discussed -- Brazilian, Mexican, Egyptian and South African -- have been tied at one time or another to Hollywood imperialism. Some, like South African cinema tend to be conservative and genre-bound, a result of the homogenising influences of capital and the constraints placed upon them by the state and its methods of subsidization. Others, however, expose contradictions within their state apparatuses. In Brazil, for example, the government is reactionary, but its film sponsoring body, Embrafilme, often finds itself in conflict with its government. Only a state organization like Embrafilme can protect Brazilian cinema from Hollywood or American imperialism, and so even leftist film makers tend to work with it. Furthermore, the objective of one government agency (censorship, for example) may find itself at odds with another (for example, Embrafilme), suggesting a complex set of inter-relations which often pit themselves against centralised state control. The opposition between capital and the state is the subject of a number of papers in this issue. The other major theme concerns that of racism in the cinema. As we shall show, the latter is necessarily bound up with the former.

The dual themes of resistance and racism are themselves linked to a third, underlying process which remains determinant in the last instance: the economic relations which govern flows of capital between the 'developed' and 'underdeveloped' countries locked into the global economic system.

Questions of development -- or rather the active process of underdevelopment -- are never far from the minds of Third World film makers who are working towards a fundamental redistribution of wealth and rearrangement of the social formation in their respective countries. All the articles included in this volume assume a knowledge of the effects of 'development' on the way indigenous film industries are structured. Since this aspect of

cinema remains the single most under-researched area in studies of film industries, this brief introduction will touch on some of the more pertinent definitions which should be borne in mind when discussing the concept of Third World cinema:

Where is the Third World? The theoretical cogency of this label has become a cliché and has been trivialized by those orthodox economists and political scientists whose ideological terms of reference have had the effect of identifying it as a geographically locatable set of areas inhabited by 'backward' peoples and static economies. The Third World is conceptualised by those dualist analysts as a multiplicity of different areas which all have common characteristics: poverty, primitiveness, economic and social stasis, and so on.

Dualist scholars take as their starting point that the subordinate sector -- what they call the 'subsistence economy' -- is the mirror image of the dominant sector. Thus, the Third World is most often negatively defined in terms of what it is not, rather than in terms of what it is. It is thus viewed as a residual category, which is seen as the antithesis of the First World.

A useful outline of the procedure typically adopted by dualist theorists is offered by Geoffrey Kay¹. The first step is to distinguish between the 'developed' and 'underdeveloped' countries, which is usually done in terms of their quantitative output, for example, gross national income. The currently vogue terminology is the 'rich north' as opposed to the 'poor south'. The analyst then applies an analogous distinction on the micro-level by identifying two apparently separate economies operating within the same underdeveloped country. One sector is characterised as modern, developing and dynamic, and has as its alter-ego a sector which is seen as traditional and underdeveloped. The two are perceived as isolated from one another, and the problem is then seen as one of transference. The logical *coup de grâce* is the identification of the 'developed sector' as capitalist (a proposition no-one would deny), and since the underdeveloped sector has been identified as a separate, unrelated and mutually exclusive sector, it is identified as a non-capitalist sector. From here, it is a simple semantic step to use 'capitalism' as a synonym for 'development', while conversely, 'underdevelopment' and 'backwardness' become interchangeable with the 'absence of capitalist relations'². This spurious argument, while apparently true on the level of appearance, ideologically conceals capitalism's active role in, and reliance on, the process of underdevelopment to bolster its own reproduction.

It is clear from the above that the explanatory power of the conventional dualist representation rests on the identification of a lack of interdependence between the two sectors. The subordinate sector, the 'traditional' economy, is awarded an independent and autonomous status, existing, as it were, prior to the dominant, capitalist sector. These are the premises which provided for an explanation of the colonial epoch in such a way as to virtually absolve (by definition) the colonising power from any active part in the impoverishment and underdevelopment of the colonised.

The above suggests the broad dimensions of dualism: it is not

simply an economic model or construct, but serves the overtly ideological purpose of providing an all-inclusive, superficially coherent account of the colonial and neo-colonial periods. Kay's remark concerning the colonial psyche is pertinent here: "In the colonial mind the world was divided into civilised men and natives, and the gulf that divided them was considered unbridgeable". The idea of 'civilization' is here clearly predicated on the assumption that underdevelopment is an original state for some societies. Thus the responsibility for the active process of impoverishment of the world's poor cannot be laid at the door of any country or class. In one sweeping epistemological step, "colonialism was exonerated". The same premise makes possible a plethora of more or less overtly racial explanations. This is evidenced in the persistent references to 'lack of entrepreneurship', 'backwardness', 'slow adaption', 'idleness', 'irrationality' -- all traits which are said to occur in varying degrees at the non-capitalist end of the pole. Always lurking in the background is the image of dynamism at the one end, and stasis and stagnation at the other. For these theorists then, nothing seems more logical than the conclusion that the 'solution' to the 'problem' of underdevelopment is to impose the virtues of the former in the confidence that they will inevitably neutralise the inherent vices of the latter.

In sum, dualists are able to conveniently divide up the world into North versus South, East versus West, rich versus poor, and by implication, rich North versus poor South. The racist connotations of this equation are quite clear: rich *white* North versus poor *black* South. This logic sees whites as inherently 'progressive' and blacks as congenitally 'backward' who need assistance if they are to develop into a civilized world.

For radical social scientists, however, the Third World derives from a set of economic relations which have had the effect of locating this world *not* in terms of alleged physical characteristics, but in terms of its *relation* to international capital during the successive periods of early capitalism (competitive capitalism) and late capitalism (monopoly capitalism) which have spanned the last two hundred years. When the authors in this volume talk of the Third World they mean an area or a specific country which is or has been made subordinate to dominant imperialist nations represented by the First World, mainly Europe, Britain and the United States'. 'First' and 'Third', therefore describe not only spatial boundaries, as the orthodox economists would have it, but during the phase of early capitalism at least, a hierarchy of economic exploitation.

As far as radical social science is concerned, underdevelopment in the Third World describes, not a primitive state of being as is argued by orthodox economists, but a state which has been brought about through economic exploitation of labour, resources and markets in countries subordinate to the demands of monopoly capitalism. Underdevelopment then, is the active process of appropriation by imperial states of a subordinate country's wealth. This colonial system works on two levels. First, on the macro-level of the international where the comprador and interior bourgeoisies of individual countries aid the process of international centralization of capital; and second, the micro or domestic level, where the interior bourgeoisies appropriate

wealth from their own countrymen and women. This is most clearly seen in India and South Africa, while all countries dealt with in this volume are subject, in varying degrees, to the demands of international capital.

What is Third Cinema? This term is less rigorously defined and should not be confused with the concept of Third World. Third Cinema is not wholly consistent with the Third World, although the concept was originally enunciated by Third World film makers. Third Cinema, like the Third World has its two antecedents as well: First and Second Cinema. First Cinema is generally referred to as the genre cinema of the imperialist states which encodes and legitimises the capitalist relations of production and the way in which capital would like viewers to perceive reality. Second cinema accounts for those attempts to break with First Cinema and replace it with alternative views represented in Italian neo-realism or the French New Wave cinema. These two styles, however, continued to neglect the imperialist influences of the capitalist relations of production.

The concern for alternative societies, whether socialist or otherwise, is the province of Third Cinema which not only expresses resistance but is itself a part of the class struggle. Not part of the film establishment, Third Cinema is financed by people committed to revolution and change. The concept was developed by Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino who made *La Hora de los Hornos* (The Hour of the Furnaces), a three hour documentary which analyses and criticises neo-colonialism in Latin America. While many Third Cinema films are now being made by professionals who have managed to breach the contradictions of capitalism, many continue to be made under repressive circumstances and state hostility. The most brutal of these concerned *The Hour of the Generals* in which there is a documentary sequence of an execution of strike leaders in the desert. After all the workers had been shot, the cameraman was shot as well. This footage, however, was saved by bribing the soldiers who had performed the execution⁷.

Third Cinema then, should not be confused with 'Cinema in the Third World', the latter describing the films and production methods which owe their allegiance to the imperial states of the First World in terms of commercial objectives, treatment, content, dramatic structure and production methods. Third Cinema describes the reaction of oppositional film makers to a set of economic relations, and like the idea of the Third World, is not necessarily identified through its location in particular places or geographic areas.

The present volume deals with both categories of film -- Third Cinema and cinema of the Third World. The issues of development, underdevelopment and their relation to cinema, themselves require far more attention than they have hitherto received from students of the cinema.

Racism. The effect of racist practices in cinema is the subject of the first paper and represents an excursion into another equally underresearched area. While much effort goes into 'inter-cultural' studies on cinema, whether comparative or internal to a particular society, these analyses essentially displace the more important question of racism which informs, not only the society at large,

but the production process as well. What these authors consider a cause is more particularly an effect. There has, in recent years, occurred a plethora of such studies in both the United States and South Africa. The former, mainly comparative in nature, assumes a simplistic one-way reflection of racial representations in a reductionist manner, while the latter are often nothing more than thinly disguised attempts to legitimise racial segregation by emphasising racial and cultural differences as opposed to similarities.

Very often, however, even these 'intercultural' connections are ignored in the assumptions which underlie film and cinema studies. Film history, for example, is usually written as if the Third World did not exist. Despite the fact that it is collectively a huge supplier, 700 films made yearly in India and 100 in Brazil, its cinema is considered with condescension by most First World and even Third World scholars. This kind of neo-colonialist attitude works hand in hand with international capital by shaping cultural responses which benefit its global function.

Racism thus works at many interconnected levels ranging from academic perceptions of economic relations, through production practices on the film set to the analysis of cinema itself. It helps to lubricate the relations of production in any capitalist society, is encoded in film texts and production practices and is often legitimised by academics. These scholars take the film image at 'face value' and unquestioningly assume that class differences are caused by cultural and racial differences.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

- ¹ Kay, G. 1975: *Development and Underdevelopment, a Marxist Analysis*.
- ² Ibid. p. 6
- ³ Ibid. p. 1
- ⁴ Ibid. p. 2
- ⁵ There is little agreement on definitions of the Second World. Some scholars hold that the First World colonies fall into this category, while others argue that it accounts for the socialist European bloc. Indeed, the Second World seems to be a non-concept and is hardly ever mentioned in studies of development and underdevelopment.
- ⁶ See Solanas, F. and Gettino, O. 1976: "Towards a Third Cinema" in Nichols, B. (ed.): *Movies and Methods*. University of California Press, Berkeley
- ⁷ See Henney, L.M. 1976: "The Role of Filmmakers in Revolutionary Social Change", *Praxis*, Vol. 1, No. 2, pp. 157-175