

Definition of 'third world' (John Isbister)

Isbister traces its use to the 1950s in France, as a pun:

based on the terms used to describe the three social classes that had political authority in the *ancien regime* of pre-revolutionary France [the clergy; the nobility; and the bourgeoisie or commercial class]. Political power resided in the hands of the first and second estates . . . in 18th century France, the term *third estate*, or *tiers etat*, became a revolutionary slogan . . . to establish liberty, equality and fraternity; to transfer political power from a small oligarchy to the third estate, and thence to the people as a whole. (p. 15)

French intellectuals later used the term *tiers monde*, or *Third World*, to imply the "third estate" of Europe in the post World War II period. As Isbister argues,

It connoted the majority, the dispossessed, the excluded - and it also connoted revolution . . . *Third World* became the banner of the hungry and the oppressed.... [but] in its origins, the term Third World carried with it a sense of opposition, tension and struggle . . . The term itself called for change, for an extension of liberty and equality to those who did not have it . . . It drew attention to colonialism and imperialism and to their modern-day counterparts in a world of oppression and unequal power. (p. 15)

Over the years, the definition of the *Third World* has "softened" and it has taken on the meaning of impoverished, unaligned, non-influential. Isbister now defines the *Third World* as referring to:

the poor of the world, those who are disenfranchised in an international system dominated by the industrialized countries: the north, the developed, the rich. For the most part, the hopes that are inherent in the term *Third world* have not been fulfilled. As the 20th century draws to a close, most of the people of Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and Latin America have not drawn near to the people of the rich countries in terms of either standard of living or political power. [p. 16]