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## Beyond the single story: ‘Global South’ polyphonies

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### ABSTRACT

With reference to Chimamanda Ngozie Adichie’s plea to move beyond the single story, we take the complexities of the ‘Global South’ meta category as a starting point to explore what abandoning the quest for neatness can look like. Building on the main arguments put forward across this volume, our contribution centres around questions of position(alitie)s and self-reflexivity to engage with the persistent ambivalences of the ‘Global South’. We reflect on the unease stemming from explicit and implicit claims connected to the ‘Global South’ category and discuss its fluidity and plurality across space and time. Ultimately, we suggest embracing the notion of polyphony for approaching the ‘Global South’. A focus on polyphonies allows us to connect specific meanings and their implications with a broader take on the inherent complexities of macro categories. Working with and through polyphonies also helps us to recognise and engage with the evolving agency behind different uses of the ‘Global South’.

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Having one single story to tell can be reassuring – and, as Nigerian novelist Chimamanda Ngozie Adichie argues, also incredibly limiting.<sup>1</sup> A single story captures and reifies a phenomenon while turning a blind eye to obvious tensions, subtle intricacies and uncomfortable simultaneities. A single story, Adichie holds, is necessarily incomplete. In the final contribution to this volume we take the complexities of the ‘Global South’ meta category as a starting point to explore what abandoning the quest for this single story can look like. As outlined in the volume’s introduction, meta categories are about the construction of meaning.<sup>2</sup> By and large, references to the ‘Global South’ – the ‘Global North’, the ‘East’, the ‘West’ and so on<sup>3</sup> – reflect attempts to make global space palpable by dividing it into chunks that allegedly share some basic characteristics. Macro categories usually come with a considerable level of generalisation; and if these generalised accounts are told as a single story, they foster simplistic and rather static images. Building on the main arguments put forward in this volume, our contribution centres around questions of position(alitie)s and self-reflexivity to engage with the persistent ambivalences of the ‘Global South’. We reflect on the unease stemming from explicit and implicit claims connected to the ‘Global South’ category and discuss its fluidity and plurality across space and time. Ultimately, we suggest embracing

the idea of polyphonies to inform our engagement with the 'Global South'. A focus on polyphonies allows us to connect specific meanings and their implications with a broader take on the inherent complexities of macro categories. Working with and through polyphonies also helps us to recognise and engage with the evolving agency behind different uses of the 'Global South'.

### 'Global South' unease

The contributions in this volume, as well as our work and life experiences as researchers and practitioners in the field of international relations and South–South cooperation, suggest that the 'Global South' category is both useful and incomplete. Many scholars – ourselves included – are acutely aware of the limitations and politics surrounding 'South'-related terminology. From a state-centred perspective, it is not always clear which countries are part of the 'South'; and in terms of individual belonging the picture is even more complicated.<sup>4</sup> Yet the 'Global South' constitutes a particularly popular category that not only points to questions about the (in)adequacies of how we frame and approach our research, but also challenges the way we think about and present the evolving positions from which we speak. When using the term, we – scholars engaging with and/or framed as belonging to the 'Global South' – tend to add a 'but', a disclaimer or an additional explanation. It is our persistent discomfort about broad generalisations and their potential implications that compels us to place the term 'Global South' within inverted commas, or prefix it with phrases like 'so-called'. These interpolations signal our unease with the label and/or our awareness of its necessarily incomplete approximation.<sup>5</sup>

Across the academic, activist and policy circles in which we have been embedded, questions about inclusion, representation and authenticity have played an increasingly visible role.<sup>6</sup> Although many of these conversations characteristically take place in 'Northern' settings – manifesting, for example, in calls to decolonise curricula or teaching pedagogies – questions of access and privilege also cut across the North–South divide.<sup>7</sup> With regard to those belonging to the global middle class, in particular, individual biographies are increasingly at odds with clear-cut assignments.<sup>8</sup> While unresolved questions about belonging can lead to moments of ontological anxiety – deep-seated insecurity about who we are – they often tend to translate into feelings of lingering unease. Macro categories inspired by the cardinal directions of East, South, West and North, in particular, point to complex and potentially uncomfortable queries about positionalities in the geographies of world politics and scholarly inquiry.

Many of those engaging with questions connected to the 'Global South' are much more than simply 'Southern' or 'Northern' scholars. For some of us, writing and thinking 'from the South' is an intellectually and emotionally complex – and sometimes fraught – experience. To refract our identities, scholarly pursuits and interests through the single prism of the 'Global South' would be to adopt the kind of 'solitarist'<sup>9</sup> approach to identity-making that Amartya Sen warns us against. In its most unsophisticated form, then, the 'Global South' is a label that flattens complex realities, renders invisible a series of inter- and intra-state inequalities, undermines geographical heterogeneity, and pre-assigns political agendas and ideologies. In Adichie's words, this is how assignments of 'Global South' and 'Global North' can box scholars and the people, places and spaces they investigate into single stories.

An additional source of unease about the usage of 'Global South' terminology is arguably connected to the particular spatial dimension of its increasing invocation. Geopolitical shifts and evolving dynamics within the global academic landscape that arguably challenge 'Western' dominance<sup>10</sup> have given rise to concerns about the relative standing of one's own background(s) and credentials. Emotional registers – including underlying anxieties – informing the use of the 'Global South' category are present in both but clearly differ across 'Northern' and 'Southern' spaces. Available evidence and our own experiences suggest that the recent boom of 'Global South' terminology across publications is, above all, a phenomenon in Anglophone academic and policy discussions often taking place in 'Northern/Western' institutional settings. Ongoing geopolitical shifts, combined with escalating concerns over issues of access and privilege, have contributed to a heightened sense of urgency among scholars at 'Northern' institutions to revise the terminology used to talk about the 'Other', the 'Rest' or the 'developing world'. In many 'Northern/Western' settings, the expanding recourse to the 'Global South' further reflects shifts across academia that increasingly require – at least nominally – cross-cutting representation, resulting not only in potential disquiet by those representing the old order but also in a heightened discomfort about the requirements of an evolving academic industry that, while insisting on diversity, often reproduces and entrenches traditional power patterns.<sup>11</sup>

'Global South' framings, moreover, are neither universally nor homogeneously employed across geographies. From our joint experiences, it appears that – some exceptions notwithstanding – '(Global) South' terminology has generally had more traction at the United Nations<sup>12</sup> and in 'Northern/Western' academic contexts than domestically in most of the 'developing world'.<sup>13</sup> As an emblematic 'Southern' powerhouse<sup>14</sup> and a major site for 'Global South'-related inquiry, Brazil, for instance, might be expected to be a foremost space for engagement with the 'Global South' category and related terminology.<sup>15</sup> This, however, is not the case. In fact, the term is rarely used in academic conversations there; instead, it is not uncommon to hear from Brazilian social scientists an additional disclaimer along the lines of *'o tal Sul Global, como eles dizem'* ['the so-called Global South, as they say']. Such formulations, differentiating 'they' (ie 'Northern/Western' academia or international organisations) from 'us' (ie Brazilians) is telling of a potential divide, which is also linguistic, in the use of terminology that is largely perceived as pertaining to 'Northern' and/or English-speaking circles. In Brazil, as in other places where 'rising power' aspirations coincide with highly unequal domestic contexts,<sup>16</sup> social scientists seem to be particularly cautious to employ a meta category that might underplay not only differences between 'Southern' countries but also structural inequalities at home.

### 'Global South' pluralities

What transpires through a cursory look at some of the complexities attached to 'South'-related terminology is that the 'Global South' category seems to have become an identity shorthand that we simultaneously reject and need. Reject, because it is quite often the singular identity to which countries, individuals and scholars in and from the 'developing world' – or, well, the 'South' – are reduced. Need, because it does in fact capture part of our experiences, illuminates underlying power dynamics, and resonates with broader debates about global inequalities. This ambivalence is further complicated – or enriched – by the plurality that has accompanied the category's usage across spaces. The spectrum of

approaches to the 'Global South' – ranging from romanticised or acritical/pragmatic to (maybe overly) critical or well-meaning but tokenistic – reflects multiple and simultaneous conversations. They are embedded in academic and/or policy settings where the category serves as a tool for a variety of purposes: to instantiate an unfulfilled decolonial aspiration and work towards academic/epistemic inclusivity and representativeness; to tap into (often 'Northern') grants and funding schemes, many of which explicitly aim at fostering research in/on recipient countries of Official Development Assistance; or to celebrate and/or challenge the political and economic rise of certain 'Southern' countries by highlighting their (imagined) transformative potential or exposing their (supposed) lack of solidarity vis-à-vis 'the Rest'.<sup>17</sup>

The purposes and meanings attached to the 'Global South' meta category have also changed over time. The idea of the 'South', as it emerged during the Cold War at the United Nations, was mainly a political tool to forge a common identity and denominator among countries across Africa, Latin America and (most of) Asia. The 'South' was arguably not conceived as a materially homogeneous entity, but difference was deliberately downplayed – in line with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's notion of strategic essentialism<sup>18</sup> – to forge a common political identity in opposition to but also entangled with its Other, the 'developed world' or 'North'. In recent years, the '(Global) South' category has gained purchase within academia also to denote the quest for power or status by large middle-income countries, not only Brazil, China and India but also South Africa, Mexico, Turkey or Indonesia.<sup>19</sup> This expanding focus on the trajectories of so-called 'rising' or 'emerging' powers – another set of complex categories<sup>20</sup> – has further complicated previous (and often simplistic) notions of 'Southern' empowerment. It has revealed deep fractures around notions of state-to-state solidarity and collective emancipation, as well as state–society divergences around development and developmental models.<sup>21</sup> While 'emerging powers' have claimed to represent or speak for the 'developing world', also as champions of the most recent wave of South–South cooperation, their own 'rise' has been embedded in power asymmetries within and across countries, often framed with and obscured by the 'performative function'<sup>22</sup> of South–South principles of solidarity, non-interference, horizontality and mutual gains.

While this performativity reflects a particular kind of agency that manages to instrumentalise the 'Global South' category for specific processes and fora at the international level, 'South'-related framings have also shifted with regard to domestic particularities. In Brazil, political elites have often uncomfortably navigated the multiple identities and aspirations of simultaneously belonging to the 'West' and/or the 'South' by trying to act as a bridge.<sup>23</sup> The will to define itself as a 'Southern' country has been reversed once more since the *Partido dos Trabalhadores* left power in 2016. Under the far-right government of Jair Bolsonaro, in particular, Brazil has been openly denying its 'Southern' reformist identity as a means – and part of a bid – to integrate 'Northern/Western'-led policy spaces, including the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development.<sup>24</sup> In a similar line, recent framing shifts in India cannot be understood without taking domestic fault lines into account. Narendra Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party government has taken a clear stance against the legacy of the Congress Party, which ruled India after independence and throughout the Cold War when India's 'Southern' identity – and the idea of India as a champion of the 'Third World' – was forged internationally. The current nationalist turn in India<sup>25</sup> attempts to tear apart the classic North–South divide, and – similar to what Paul Kohlenberg and Nadine Godehardt discuss with regard to China in this volume<sup>26</sup> – advances instead the idea of a new India-centred world. In official discourse, a number of states outside the 'North/West' have embarked on

a similar trajectory.<sup>27</sup> Despite an increasing emphasis on their civilisational state identities over and above their self-identification as 'Global South' actors, they continue to strategically mobilise and perform their 'Southern-ness' in spaces where it is politically expedient to do so.

### 'Global South' polyphonies

With Adichie, reifying a person, a country or a continent – or, here, people, countries and continents subsumed under one meta category – is tantamount to creating and reproducing a single story. In light of the plurality of uses of and the evolving agency behind references to the 'Global South', this volume explicitly challenges the quest for a single story. While individual contributions to this volume reflect the perspectives and positionalities that have informed their production, they are nonetheless part of a broader undertaking to promote the explicit examination of meta categories. Like single stories, macro categories as attempts to grasp vast social space always remain incomplete. A plurality of stories about a macro category, however, can highlight the contingency of meanings and make this incompleteness explicit and legible. Having multiple signifiers does not necessarily mean a category is doomed to succumb to what has been referred to as unruly 'conceptual stretch'.<sup>28</sup> Rather, it requires scholars to use it cautiously and critically, be explicit about conceptual polysemy, and develop a critical sensibility towards the polyphony to which these multiple signifiers belong.

Building on key insights from contributions to this volume, we suggest approaching meta categories through this notion of polyphony. Combining the Greek terms for 'many' (*polys*) and 'sound' (*phōnē*), polyphony includes an attention to plurality; but while plurality primarily acknowledges the existence of different approaches, polyphony puts a focus on how these different approaches contribute to a broader phenomenon, in our case the meta category of the 'Global South'.<sup>29</sup> Similar to how different melodic lines simultaneously weave through a piece of music, an evolving range of explicit definitions, implicit meanings and patterns of *de facto* understandings coexist under the 'Global South' banner.<sup>30</sup> Beyond narrow definitions and exact operationalisations, acknowledging the polyphonies connected to the 'Global South' category combines a focus on specific understandings with an awareness of the broader evolving phenomenon. Polyphonies, unlike the excessive and confusing noise usually associated with cacophonies, recognise the potential of working with the combination of ambiguities, ambivalences and fluidities that meta categories have to offer.<sup>31</sup>

Throughout the polyphonies of the 'Global South', as it were, there are different ways in which the category continues to be useful for academic inquiry. They build on arguments put forward in contributions to this volume and resonate with our experiences as scholars and practitioners living and working through and across North–South complexities. Analytically, the distinction between 'South' and 'North' in general, and the 'Global South' category in particular, offer a tool to investigate, frame and discuss multilateral hierarchies, unequal transnational entanglements, or global patterns of inclusion/exclusion.<sup>32</sup> The 'Global South' can help to capture identity and differentiation struggles across social fields, including a series of mediation and translation attempts between actors across the 'North' and the 'South'. Reflexively, the category provides a reference for fundamental questions of subjectivity, positionality and belonging in transnational spaces. A self-aware usage of the 'Global South' calls for open discussions about our analytical choices and their implications. Combining an attention to 'Global South' polyphonies with problematising the category of 'rising powers', for instance, invites scholars to work on/with diversity within and among

‘Southern’ spaces. In line with Siddharth Tripathi’s take on the discipline of international relations in this volume,<sup>33</sup> it also offers an entrance point for inquiring how ‘Southern’ societies, and academics in particular, are mobilising the concepts of ‘(Global) South’ and ‘South–South cooperation’, also to develop a sense of where the empirical reiterations or mutations of the category might be moving to. Privileging self-reflexivity in how we engage with the ‘Global South’ means treating our ontological unease not as a limitation or hindrance to self-actualisation but as an expression of our subjective state of being. This recognises that there is no *a priori* ‘Global South’, and that scholars need to make explicit the signifiers attached to and informing the use of ‘South’-related terminology.<sup>34</sup> Acknowledging and working with multiple, or even contradictory, epistemologies does not undermine the category as such. On the contrary, the promise of the ‘Global South’ also lies in its mobility and plurality. The explicit engagement with complexity destabilises an idealised ‘Global South’ and arguably rescues it from being subsumed into a totalising single story.

Embedding the ‘Global South’ within an overarching framework of self-reflexivity also means exploring what the term itself becomes when appropriated by different actors. Irrespective of and/or in parallel with persisting levels of unease surrounding North–South terminology, the multitudinous ways in which references to the ‘Global South’ are mobilised opens up a space for engagement with issues around agency and, perhaps, empowerment. In other words, a focus on reflexivity recognises the politics of using the ‘Global South’ as a meta category. As we glean from contributions to this volume, the ‘Global South’ can be used to denote a political programme for decolonial resistance,<sup>35</sup> delineate hierarchical boundaries between the haves and haves-not,<sup>36</sup> or challenge academic practices.<sup>37</sup> Aware of the politics of labelling and categorising, and the epistemological challenges meta categories and ‘travelling’ concepts pose to critical scholarship, we argue that the ‘Global South’, through a focus on its polyphonies, invites scholars to embrace a (self-)critical approach to mobilising and using the category and related terminology in their work.

In line with the unease, pluralities and polyphonies discussed above, a self-reflexive focus on the ‘Global South’ category also interrogates our own discomfort – and sometimes obsession – with seeking analytical neatness, coherence and homogeneity. It further interrogates whether this discomfort refers (and appears in our writings in regard) only to this particular meta category, or whether it also features in how we employ other equally generalising ones, such as the ‘West’ or the ‘(Global) North’. The critical and explicit engagement with the ‘Global South’ in this volume can serve as an inspiration and reference for investigating the macro categories we use to find our way in global social space.<sup>38</sup> The polyphonies of the ‘Global South’, we suggest, can be more than indiscriminate noise. Making assumptions, inconsistencies or frictions explicit is an integral part of acknowledging that the ‘Global South’ category is more than just a source of unease or the umbrella for a potentially indefinite list of meanings. With a commitment to a self-reflexive take on evolving power relations and position(alitie)s, ‘Global South’ polyphonies can be part and parcel of the current soundtrack of attempts to make sense of, and to assert agency over, the contours of world politics. Polyphonies consist of and make space for a multitude of stories. And, as Adichie reminds us, stories – always plural – matter.

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## Notes

1. Adichie, "Danger of a Single Story."
2. Haug, Braveboy-Wagner, and Maihold, "Global South" in the Study of World Politics."
3. On the 'Global East', see Müller, "In Search of the Global East."
4. See Haug, "Thirdspace Approach"; Tripathi, "International Relations and the 'Global South'."
5. On unease from a postcolonial or decolonial perspective, see Boatcă, "Uneasy Postcolonialisms."
6. Roychoudhury, "Avuncular" Gatekeepers"; Gunasekara, "(Un)Packing Baggage."
7. On the decolonising movement across the 'Global South', see Platzky Miller, "Politics, Education and the Imagination."
8. Haug, "Let's Focus on Facilitators."
9. An approach to human identity that overlooks its complexity and multidimensionality. Sen, *Identity and Violence*.
10. On 'post-Western' dynamics, see Stuenkel, *Post-Western World*.
11. Anderl and Witt, "Problematising the Global in Global IR." On diversity in higher education, see Ahmed, *On Being Included*.
12. See Haug, "Mainstreaming South–South."
13. See Kamwengo, "We Need People Like You"; Ming'ate, "Global South: What Does It Mean."
14. United Nations Development Programme, *Rise of the South*.
15. At South African institutions, however, a substantial body of publications has used 'Global South' terminology; see Scopus, "Keyword Search."
16. Faria and Lopes, "As Assimetrias Internacionais."
17. Cooper, "China, India and the Pattern."
18. Spivak, "Criticism, Feminism and the Institution."
19. Gray and Gills, "South–South Cooperation." See also Cooper, "China, India and the Pattern"; Kohlenberg and Godehardt, "Locating the 'South' in China's Connectivity Politics"; Haug, "Thirdspace Approach."



20. Zarakol, "Rise of the Rest."
21. Waisbich, "Negotiating Accountability"; Waisbich and Mawdsley, "South–South Cooperation: Researching and Theorising."
22. Aneja, "South–South Cooperation and Competition."
23. Cervo and Bueno, *História da Política Exterior Do Brasil*. On Mexico and Turkey as North–South bridges, see Haug, "Thirthing North/South."
24. Casarões, "Leaving the Club."
25. Chacko, "Right Turn in India."
26. Kohlenberg and Godehardt, "Locating the 'South' in China's Connectivity Politics." On anxieties and domestic debates in China, see Cheng, "Landscape of Ideas."
27. Acharya, "Myth of the 'Civilization State.'"
28. Sartori, "Comparing and Miscomparing."
29. Reiter, *Constructing the Pluriverse*.
30. For an overview of different meanings attached to South–South cooperation, see Haug, "Mainstreaming South–South."
31. Tsing, *Mushroom at the End of the World*.
32. See Berger, "'Global South' as a Relational Category"; Koch, "Cities as Transnational Climate Change Actors."
33. Tripathi, "International Relations and the 'Global South.'"
34. Haug, Braveboy-Wagner, and Maihold, "'Global South' in the Study of World Politics."
35. Boatcă, "Unequal Institutions."
36. See the discussion in Haug, "Thirdspace Approach."
37. Tripathi, "International Relations and the 'Global South.'"
38. See Wagner, *Moral Mappings of South and North*.

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