

Industrial Heritage from the Global South

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Abstract

"Industrial heritage" as a concept emerged in the 1970s and 80s in countries of the Global North. Since then, the theories and methods that have been developed from these specific contexts, characterized by the economic and social crises that deindustrialization provoked there at the time, have been transferred to other regions of the world without much questioning of whether this was, and is, at all appropriate given the uneven experience of industrialization and distinctive social realities on the ground in each case. The traditional focus of the North on self-referential narratives of technical and economic innovation, as well as on heroic narratives of the great white men who brought eternal progress and growth to the world, still obscure the view that in the so-called "underdeveloped" countries there may have existed other ideas for the future, whose local development paths came to an often abrupt and too often violent end with the arrival of Western-style modernity and the European-style extractivist model.

The aim of this essay is to review major moments in the international conceptual debate that dealt with this kind of issues over the past 15 years, building on written sources in different languages, as well as on explorative conversations with colleagues from Latin America, Africa and Asia during the pandemic. The account cannot be complete. Much has moved in the last 15 years, and postcolonial issues have even turned into a hype in the North lately, but we are still only on the way. One fundamental critique is that active listening from the North is missing, the perspective is still too often limited and self-referential. It seems to be a major challenge to admit ignorance of unknowable distinct social realities, specific cultural and political contexts, and to accept language barriers. A direct human exchange and even a certain degree of immersion are needed to build a debate between equals without paternalism, however well intended. A lot of work is still to be done before the concept of industrial heritage can be 'decolonised'.