

Is It Time for a Virtual Global South Perspective?

Maria Nefeli Giannia, Eberhard Karls University of Tübingen, Germany

The Asian Conference on the Social Sciences 2026
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

The present study reassesses the limits of the Global South to account for contemporary global realities. In this regard, the research is situated primarily within a relational and postcolonial tradition, while also drawing on critical political economy. The article argues that, despite the historical significance of the Global North/Global South division, its re-examination has become imperative from a social science perspective in order to render visible various forms of unequal power relations and the marginalisation of social groups and populations that spatially belong to already “privileged” frameworks. In this context, the paper introduces the term Virtual Global South (VGS) as a conceptual extension of the Global South, aiming to broaden its analytical reach beyond strict geographical or geopolitical boundaries. The term VGS is employed to denote a mode of existence defined by its operative effects rather than by formal or official recognition. The article proposes a brief overview of existing critiques on the Global North and the Global South, in dialogue with the author’s critical position, before exploring how the current classification criteria of the Global South can be revised to accommodate the concept of the VGS. Finally, Mediterranean Europe is examined as an illustrative case, insofar as during and after the 2008 economic crisis, there appeared narratives and practices that echoed structures and vocabulary of (neo)colonial character. The analysis moves beyond the level of the nation-state as the sole analytical unit, allowing for the examination of specific subnational regions.

Keywords: Global South, virtual Global South, Mediterranean Europe, southernness, neocolonialism, globalisation, capitalism

iafor

The International Academic Forum
www.iafor.org

Introduction

For decades, the dichotomy Global North/Global South has functioned as a precious tool for giving prominence to inequalities, colonial legacies and asymmetrical hierarchies. Yet, in doing so, it has also tacitly and even unwittingly established certain geographical and geopolitical assumptions regarding the expected *topoi* of the world's wretched —assumptions that, perhaps, appear inadequate in the face of contemporary complexities.

This article argues that, to account for contemporary global realities, we must recognise that all injustices today are fundamentally produced within a single system plunged in capitalism and globalisation. This structural unity means that, in a world where dynamics and power relations are constantly reshaping, an updated mapping of contemporary experiences of “southernness”¹ becomes imperative.

The question therefore is whether the terms' current conception can continue to correspond to the era of globalisation and capitalism.² Central to our thesis is the idea that our current interpretation of the world remains anchored in earlier imaginaries, and hence the need for renewing our tools, instead of abandoning them.

Academics and scholars in the social and political sciences, as well as in cultural studies, who are interested in and care about those who live in torment have, rightfully so, focused on the planet's utmost historically oppressed regions. Yet, this often leaves *some* experiences of suffocation obscured. These are the downtrodden populations of the deep South of the North. The problem here is one of analytical invisibility that holds certain experiences of suffering in the shadow.

In response to this situation, this study proposes the term Virtual Global South (VGS) to encompass *all* lived experiences of “southernness” regardless of where they occur. By examining Mediterranean Europe as an illustrative case through relational, postcolonial, and critical political economy (CPE) lenses —supported by empirical data— the article supports that certain European societies embody lived conditions strongly resonant with the structural patterns traditionally attributed to the Global South, and therefore truly qualify as a vital part of the VGS.

Overview of the Existing Critique on the Global North/Global South Dichotomy

The recognition that novel and increasingly complex facets of inequality are being generated within a contemporary global system structured by interconnected relations of power has led a broad body of scholarship, especially over the last two decades, to subject the current understanding of the terms Global North/Global South to critical examination. In what follows, this body of critique is distilled into three key points.

¹“Southernness” is defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* as: “The quality of having a character, attitude, appearance, etc., distinctive or typical of the southern part of a country or region ... the quality or fact of being from the south.” (Oxford University Press, 2023). When employing the term in this paper, we wish to add a social, political, and economic layer to this definition. Here, “southernness” is not to be understood as (mere, or necessary) provenance, but as a position of being vulnerable and/or marginalised within a globalised system woven together from hierarchies of inequality, dependency, and myriad kinds of violence (e.g. structural, institutional...), that cuts across and traverses every border.

² An era that some consider to have *already* passed and paved the way for a new era of postglobalisation and postcapitalism.

The first point concerns the *geographical* reading of the binary. As repeatedly pointed out in the relevant literature, if one examines the Global South, they will soon come to realise that this term neither fits —neatly— to the “South of the map”, nor can it be defined on the basis of the Southern Hemisphere, or be exclusively identified with the regions to be found below the equator (de Sousa Santos, 2016; Mignolo, 2011; World Population Review, 2026).

Such an interpretation is not only analytically insufficient, but also misleading. Indicatively, countries such as India, Central America, as well as a large part of the African continent are located in the Northern Hemisphere, yet they belong almost unquestionably to the Global South. Conversely, Australia and New Zealand, though geographically situated in the Southern Hemisphere, are considered an integral part of the Global North.

Subsequently, the relevant literature highlights that a *geopolitical* reading of the binary is *equally* problematic. If these terms were to be interpreted according to a traditional geopolitical logic, then they would be expected to constitute coherent and clearly demarcated entities, both in terms of their diplomatic alliances, strategic stances, and broader political orientation and interests, as well as regarding their internal homogeneity in levels of economic development and, in our view,³ social inclusion. However, contemporary global realities do not seem to confirm such expectations.

As far as the first strand of this argument is concerned, we observe today groupings and forms of cooperation —such as the BRICS bloc— that include states conventionally classified within *both* the Global South and the Global North, thus rendering a conception of this dichotomy as two *distinct* geopolitical formations with shared positions and interests rather difficult to sustain. A key member of this alliance —namely Russia— is widely recognised as part of the Global North, while *at least one* other key member’s current global standing certainly complicates its conventional placement within the Global South —that being the case of China, as discussed earlier. Since the remaining members of the bloc are generally associated with the Global South, any attempt to interpret the Global North/Global South dichotomy in terms of a clear-cut geopolitical alignment becomes increasingly untenable.

Regarding the second strand of the same argument, a significant number of scholars maintain that the boundaries between the two categories do not function as clearly defined and impermeable borders, but as permeable and porous zones within which elements of the South can be found within the North, and vice versa. Going as far back as 1980, during one of his classes at the Centre Universitaire Experimental de Vincennes (CUEV) —later to become the Université Paris VIII— Deleuze and Lapoujade (2025, p. 389) spoke, quite presciently, of the existence of exclusively “fictional geographies” and of the idea that “the South may also be located within the North”. By pointing to Corsica and Brittany as cases of internal Souths within France —a prosperous country— Deleuze illustrates the idea that space is non-linear

³ Social concerns may not belong, strictly speaking, to the traditional core of geopolitics in the same way that economic concerns do; yet we consider them of great value to the present argument. If the aim is to assess whether spaces grouped under common geopolitical orientations are indeed internally homogeneous, then social factors cannot be bracketed out. After all, economics belongs to the broader field of the social sciences, and any critical approach attentive to lived inequalities in the present must remain open to the wider ramifications and interconnections through which such inequalities unfold.

and capable of containing experiences of both “northernness”⁴ and “southernness” within its given borders.⁵

From this perspective, the Global North and the Global South appear today more intertwined than ever, constituted through complex, overlapping structures of power and transnational networks, often coexisting within the same space. Asymmetrical trajectories and velocities of development, as well as uneven processes of integration into the global economy, intersect with patterns of exploitation and domination, producing *internal differentiations* within a single space. Such dynamics eliminate the possibility of associating entire territories exclusively with experiences of “northernness” or “southernness” within their respective “life-worlds” (Dirlik, 2007; Mignolo, 2011; Sajed, 2020; Trefzer et al., 2014).

When added together, these arguments ultimately substantiate Díaz Gras’s argument (2024) that: “No clear North–South line can be drawn on the map to divide countries in terms of their levels of economic development or political alliances.” After all, as Deleuze (2025, p. 389) rhetorically asked his students, why doubt such crossroads or intersections of North and South since what these terms essentially are, is a “*vecteur économique-politique*”?

Finally, there appears to be an ultimate explanation, as this emerges from the body of scholarship under overview, as to why neither geography nor geopolitics suffice to convey the essence of the binary today. The common denominator underlying the aforementioned critique(s) is the deep entrenchment of globalisation and the absolute imposition of the neoliberalist/capitalist system, which has fundamentally restructured the ways in which inequalities are produced, distributed and experienced across and within all spaces on Earth (Dirlik, 2007; Mignolo, 2011; Sparke, 2007). That is why, today, we should perhaps consider such intersections, in Deleuze’s spirit, with greater emphasis on their *socio-economic* dimension —without ceasing to account for the political.

We must therefore reflect on capitalism not only as a historical process, but also as a force and a factor that continues to reshape the terms Global North and Global South in the present. Drawing from de Sousa Santos (2016, pp. 18–19), the Global South operates predominantly as “a metaphor for the human suffering caused by capitalism” —for all those experiences that bear the brunt of globalisation. In this sense, de Sousa Santos supports, too, that the South —or what we have been calling “southernness”— can very easily be found within frameworks conventionally regarded as quintessentially “privileged”, such as the Global North.

On the same wavelength, it has been argued that the various big crises of the past decades have revealed that the promised benefits of globalisation have not materialised for the poor, the marginalised, and the excluded, and that the growth that had been allegedly promised for all simply never reached the greater part of the planet. It is precisely *these* groups that bear the greatest cost of neoliberal policies and institutional violence, *whether they are located in the*

⁴ When the term “northernness” is used in this paper, it should be understood as the conceptual counterpart to “southernness”, as defined in footnote 1.

⁵ While Deleuze’s example is the chronologically earliest among the works examined in this paper, in more recent years subsequent scholarship has identified additional cases illustrating similar dynamics of “the South in the North”, or the liminality of certain spaces. These include: “parts of the United States and Russia (e.g. the Caucasus [a region spanning not only Russia, but also Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia—all Global North countries])” (Mignolo, 2011), Mexico and Turkey (Haug, 2021), Savannah in Georgia, USA, and Montreal in Quebec, Canada (Caison & Vormann, 2014), the South of the USA (López, 2007), Mediterranean Europe (Dainotto, 2011; López, 2007)—an area of particular interest for us, as we shall see below—, Eastern Europe (López, 2007), as well as Southeast Europe and the Balkans (Sajed, 2020).

so-called “developing” countries or within the metropolitan centres of the North. The Global South is thus defined as a space of subaltern subjects who recognise their shared experience of living at the fringes of capitalism (Litonjua, 2012; López, 2007).

Therefore, within today’s (post)global order we ought to pose the question: what, and whom should the Global South be associated with presently? That is, in which scales can lived experiences of southernness be identified? Depending on the standpoint adopted, one might evoke groups of states, individual states, entire subnational regions, specific formations or social groups within them, but also more fragmented or mobile forms of experience, such as those of migrants, workers, homeless or stateless peoples, and minorities, excluded—for whatever reason—from dominant structures of power.

At this stage it is analytically urgent to group these contemporary, globalised, and often deterritorialised forms of inequality under a common conceptual framework, so that they may become legible and open to critical discussion. It is precisely this need that the introduction of the term Virtual Global South seeks to address within the contemporary global environment.

Towards a Virtual Global South

Rethinking our Analytical Tools

As Litonjua (2012, p. 51) has noted: “construction comes after critique”. Critique initially prepares the ground by identifying the issues and raising questions, but it cannot, *en soi*, substitute for the need to effectively reconfigure our analytical tools. We are thus now confronted with a subsequent, quite demanding task: to devise a conceptual mechanism capable of grasping system(at)ically⁶ the various entrenched forms of all the experiences that do not “fit comfortably” within today’s historical, social, economic, and political frameworks, as those manifest in the 21st century.

In this theoretical void, we propose the term Virtual Global South (VGS) as a conceptual extension of the Global South, aiming to broaden its analytical reach beyond strict geographical and geopolitical boundaries. The choice of the term “virtual” does not refer to an imaginary or unreal condition. On the contrary, it denotes potentiality, possibility and flexibility: the ability to apply it whenever and wherever relations of system(at)ic marginalisation are activated. It is employed to denote a mode of existence defined by its operative effects rather than by formal or official recognition.

VGS is proposed as an umbrella term for experiences of “southernness” that, although seemingly unrelated, share structural conditions at the margins of global capitalism and deserve to be read together. By introducing VGS, we wish to shed the necessary light especially on those experiences of “southernness” that, despite emerging within the same globalised system, remain invisible or under-analysed due to their a priori positioning within “privileged” frameworks. This aspiration is anchored in the belief—and, as shall follow, the facts that

⁶ I use the formulation “system(at)ically” deliberately in order to signal a double movement. On the one hand, “systemic” points to the fact that the injustices under discussion are not isolated or accidental, but embedded in the very architecture of the globalised system itself. On the other hand, these injustices are also “systematic”, in the sense that they are recurrent, patterned, and continuously reproduced, rather than exceptional or episodic. Our response must therefore be equal parts organised and methodic, as well as commensurate with the structural logic, scale, and depth of the contemporary world order. In schematic terms: global system → system(at)ic injustice → system(at)ic method.

prove— that the mere fact of being located within “the core pillars of modern civilisation” should by no means be a default synonym of wealth, prosperity and immunity to struggle.

VGS therefore functions as a pragmatic solution at the level of analysis. Instead of promising a magical eradication of global inequalities, it follows in the footsteps of Haraway’s (2016) philosophy. It evokes a way of “staying with the trouble”, grasping it in all its complexity *before* attempting to transcend it at a later stage.

(Neo)colonialism in Theory and Practice:⁷ The Case of Mediterranean Europe

To accomplish the proposed analytical shift towards a Virtual Global South, and to fully grasp the experiences of “southernness” in this new global age, we must, as social science researchers, “put on the glasses” of not one, but three complementary traditions *together*: the relational, the postcolonial and the critical political economy (CPE). As part of this layered approach, we will try to “wear” each “pair of glasses” separately while looking at examples related to our illustrative case, the Mediterranean Europe, in order to comprehend the intersectionality of complex mechanisms of control and power.

And so, putting on the first pair of glasses—which would be those of the relational tradition—let us examine the 2024 World Bank map (Figure 1), which classifies states according to their level of income. In this type of *oversimplified* cartography, regions commonly associated with the Global North appear, almost uniformly, grouped under the category of “high-income” countries.

Yet such a classification overlooks internal differentiations within these categories, thereby producing the *misleading* and *false* impression of a homogeneous experience of economic and social robustness within any given group. As we shall see later, such an assumption does not correspond in any way to the concrete lived realities of *all* societies placed within the same category.

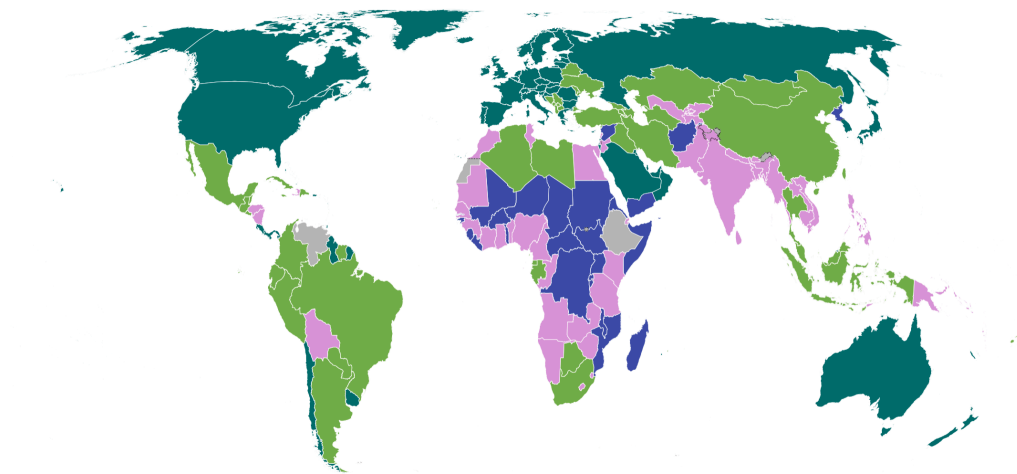
As Haug et al. (2021, p. 1928) argue: “[many assume] that the ‘Global South’ comprises all countries *outside* the ‘high-income’, ‘advanced economies’ or ‘very high human development’ strata.” (my emphasis). And therein lies the problem. Even if we accept that average incomes in Europe are higher than in other regions of the world, this does not imply that *all* social and economic experiences are equal within that same category. Such classifications fail precisely because they treat states as isolated units rather than as positions inscribed within broader relations of inequality and dependency.

Can all European countries truly be regarded as sharing a uniform experience of economic security, wage stability, or social protection simply because they are collectively classified as “high-income” by the World Bank? After all, a country is not reducible to the abstract entity of the state—which may well be wealthy or “developed”—but consists, and even more importantly so, of its people and their lived realities.

⁷ By “theory”, I refer here to the discursive and representational level at which Mediterranean Europe was/is constructed and narrated during (and after) the crisis; by “practice”, I refer to the material, institutional, and political interventions through which these constructions were translated into concrete forms of governance and control.

Figure 1
World Bank Countries Classification by Income Level

● Low income ● Lower middle income ● Upper middle income ● High income



Note. Screenshot from World Bank. (2024). *The world by income and region* [Interactive map]. World Development Indicators. Retrieved December 14, 2025, from <https://datatopics.worldbank.org/world-development-indicators/the-world-by-income-and-region.html>

“Putting on” the “glasses” of the postcolonial tradition, it becomes difficult —if not impossible— to avoid speaking of neocolonialism. The 2008 economic crisis and its management within the European Union offer particularly eloquent and poignant examples of the re-emergence of patterns that echo colonial logics, albeit in transformed, neocolonial forms (Capucha et al., 2014; Fraile, 2021; Van Vossolle, 2016). The discourses, as well as the verbal and visual representations through which Mediterranean Europe was portrayed during (and after) the crisis, constitute striking evidence that colonial patterns are not mere historical remnants buried in the dark depths of past centuries, but active and ongoing modes of meaning-making in the present.

References such as “lazy” and “irresponsible Southerners” (Böll & Böcking, 2011; Harvey, 2015; Pop, 2011), “the siesta-taking Spaniards” (Daley, 1999) or “the extravagant Greeks and Italians” (Stoiciu, 2012) dominate(d) the popular and media discourse. What is more, these characterisations were/are often “painted” with rather “colourful” phrasings.⁸ Additional narratives of corruption such as the “Southern-European model” of “Jobs for your friends, contracts for your relatives” (Schlamp, 2012) were/are also added to the equation of a “problematic Southern Europe”. Finally, what is not to be omitted, is the fact that all these elements ended up being condensed into the absolutely derogatory acronym PIGS (Portugal, Italy, Greece, and Spain).

Particularly revealing was the complementary use of political caricature and visual satire, which —far from deconstructing stereotypes— consolidated them. The caricatures that circulated in northwestern European and American media during the crisis depicted quite shamelessly the aforementioned (neo)colonial narratives. For instance, in the case of the acronym PIGS, it may have originally appeared as a lexicological reference within financial

⁸ “in the modern Italian ... perhaps the only salient characteristic left over from the Ancients ... [is] the desire to be lazy” (Wyatt, 2024); “Greece is ... the bad boy of Europe, the pantomime villain in everyone’s local theatre” (Humphrys, 2012); or “Time’s up for siestas, delayed meetings and late nights, Spaniards told in effort to make them work better” (Roberts, 2013).

discourse, but it has also been occasionally illustrated in the most brutally literal ways imaginable (Figure 2).

Figure 2

Published in 2013, This Cartoon Depicts Portugal, Italy, Greece, and Spain Represented Literally As Pigs, Lying in a Pile of Money Labelled “All You Can Eat”. Such Imagery Exemplifies a Process of Dehumanisation, Animalisation and Racialised “Otherness”, Central to (Neo)colonial Representational Logics.



Note. Trumble, D. (2013, August). *All you can eat* [Cartoon of the Month]. *W-T-W*. <https://www.w-t-w.org/en/david-trumble/>

In this regard, the power of (political) caricature should not be underestimated: it is a means of documentation which, when bent accordingly for “special purposes” (Perkins, 1975, p. 1), can strategically institute and naturalise a tailored new order of things, while presenting a novel, previously unknown and unfamiliar “reality” as legitimate. Instead of operating independently, caricatures of this nature function as a seamless feature of the news media itself, which is accustomed to actively (re-)construct events in accordance with the interests of those it represents (Wodak, 1989).

Mediterranean Europe was systematically portrayed as deficient, immature, irresponsible, or incapable of self-governance, in contrast to a hardworking, disciplined and morally superior northwestern Europe, which was constructed as such through this very opposition (Dainotto, 2000, 2007). Such racist tactics are strongly redolent of classic colonial “civilising missions”, whereby allegedly “underdeveloped” populations of “savages” were deemed in need of supervision, guidance, or discipline by others who were self-positioned as more rational, orderly, prudent and responsible.

Finally, by “wearing” the “glasses” of critical political economy (CPE), we can understand how this newly consolidated order of things, as inscribed in discourse, was translated into concrete, material, institutional, economic and political interventions. Central role in this process played, for instance, the so-called Troika,⁹ which assumed the management of the crisis in countries of Mediterranean Europe through “rescue” mechanisms.

From a CPE perspective, it is not possible to view these mechanisms as neutral technical solutions. They should rather be viewed as forms of external conditionality that profoundly restricted the scope of political choice available to recipient states, imposing extreme austerity policies, large-scale privatisations, and a significant retrenchment of the welfare state.

⁹ Troika was constituted by the European Commission, the European Central Bank (ECB) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) (European Stability Mechanism, 2019).

Van Vossle (2016, p. 15) writes: “Within the context of the crisis, the renewed European colonizers have taken over control of the PIGS’ sovereignty through the re-emergence of colonial-like indirect rule in the form of the Troika and massive privatizations.” What renders this development particularly critical is the fact that several measures initially presented as temporary, emergency responses, were gradually institutionalised within national legal orders.

In Greece, for example, the Unified Property Tax (ENFIA) (Independent Authority for Public Revenue, 2014), introduced in 2014, has remained indefinitely in the country’s tax system ever since, imposing a permanent fiscal burden on households, mostly irrespective of income volatility (ibid.), thereby embedding the pain of austerity into everyday economic life.

The repercussions of this “theory and practice” —that is, discursive and material interventions— as well as the collective pain they generated, extend well beyond one isolated example, as extensive research has documented the long-term effects of austerity policies across *all* countries of Mediterranean Europe (Alvarez-Galvez et al., 2019; Campoy-Muñoz et al., 2022; Chisari & Lega, 2023; Karanikolos et al., 2022; Quarta, 2025; Serapioni & Hespanha, 2019).

We thus argue that crisis management reconfigured these societies in durable ways and produced distortions that are, perhaps, irreversible. It is precisely these durable effects, as they sediment into the textures of everyday life, that the following section seeks to trace more closely.

Aftermath and Everyday “Southernness”

As Haug et al. (2021, p. 1993) remind us: “beyond often abstract institutional processes, this is also —and importantly— about people’s everyday practices.” It is always beneficial to proceed with empirical evidence when confronting a newly introduced concept —in this case the Virtual Global South— in order to move beyond abstraction. In an attempt to stay close to this path, we will now explore the palpable consequences and effects of the crisis’ discourses and mechanisms as manifested in people’s lived realities in the present.

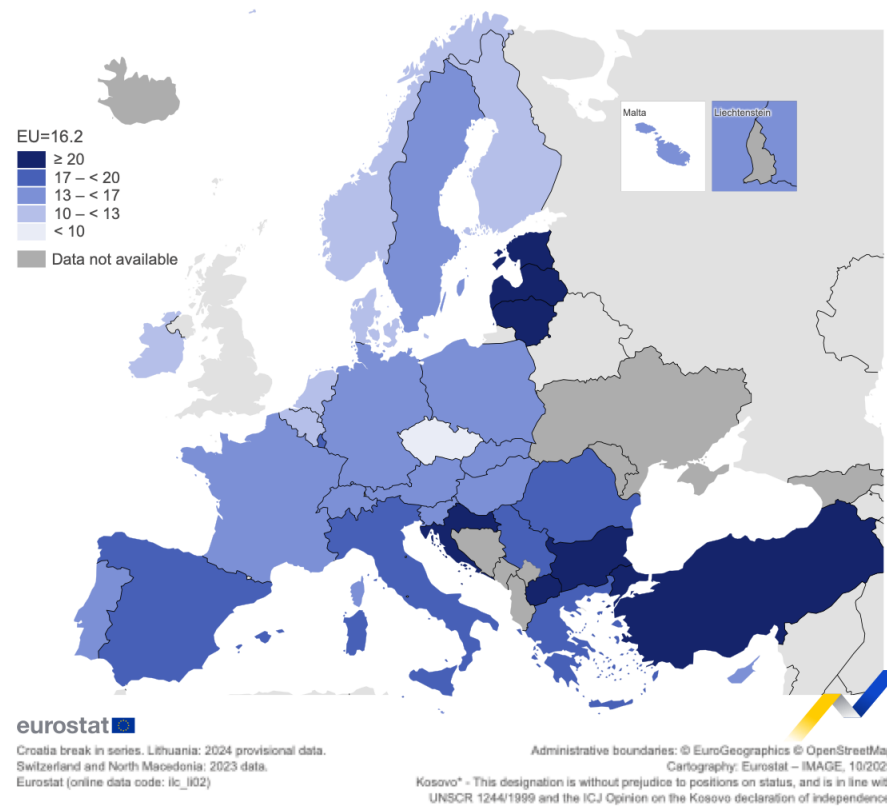
“Statistics can tell that story of poverty and inequality.” (Trefzer et al., 2014, p. 2). And not only so, but they can reveal the unevenness and heterogeneity of a political and economic entity such as the European Union, which is mostly perceived as coherent. According to Eurostat’s 2024 AROP¹⁰ data (Figure 3), Greece, Spain, and Italy record some of the highest at-risk-of-poverty rates in the European Union. On a comparative map distributing all European states, these three countries are positioned at the second most precarious position from the bottom.

¹⁰ AROP = At risk of poverty.

Figure 3
AROP Data, People at Risk of Poverty 2024

People at risk of poverty, 2024

%



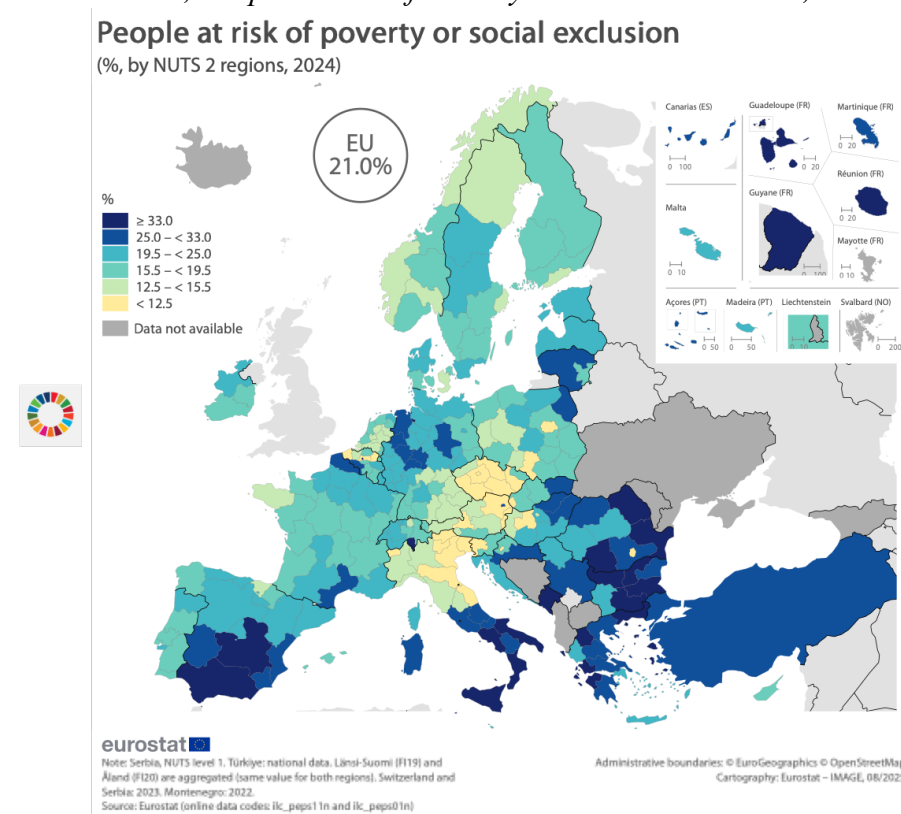
Note. Eurostat. (2024). *Living conditions in Europe: Subjective poverty statistics. Statistics Explained*. Retrieved February 18, 2026, from https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Living_conditions_in_Europe_-_subjective_poverty_statistics

This picture becomes even more complex if we turn to Eurostat's 2024 AROPE¹¹ data (Figure 4), which do not measure income poverty alone (as AROP does), but also take into account other aspects of the human experience such as severe material and deprivation rates, and very low work intensity at the household level. This regional analysis reveals, once again, that the most burdened areas are concentrated primarily in (Southern) Italy, Greece, and Spain. The issue at stake, therefore, is not merely one of income deficiency, but a broader web of hardship affecting the very fabric of everyday life: access to basic goods, housing stability, labour security, and social inclusion.

¹¹ AROPE = At risk of poverty or social exclusion.

Figure 4

AROPE Data, People at Risk of Poverty and Social Exclusion, 2024



Note. Eurostat. (2024). *Living conditions statistics at regional level. Statistics Explained.* Retrieved December 28, 2025, from https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Living_conditions_statistics_at_regional_level

That being said, if we take a step back, the broader pattern becomes even more revealing. The European Commission’s 2014 map of the social exclusion dimension (Figure 5) suggests that this geography of vulnerability was already visible at a much earlier stage.

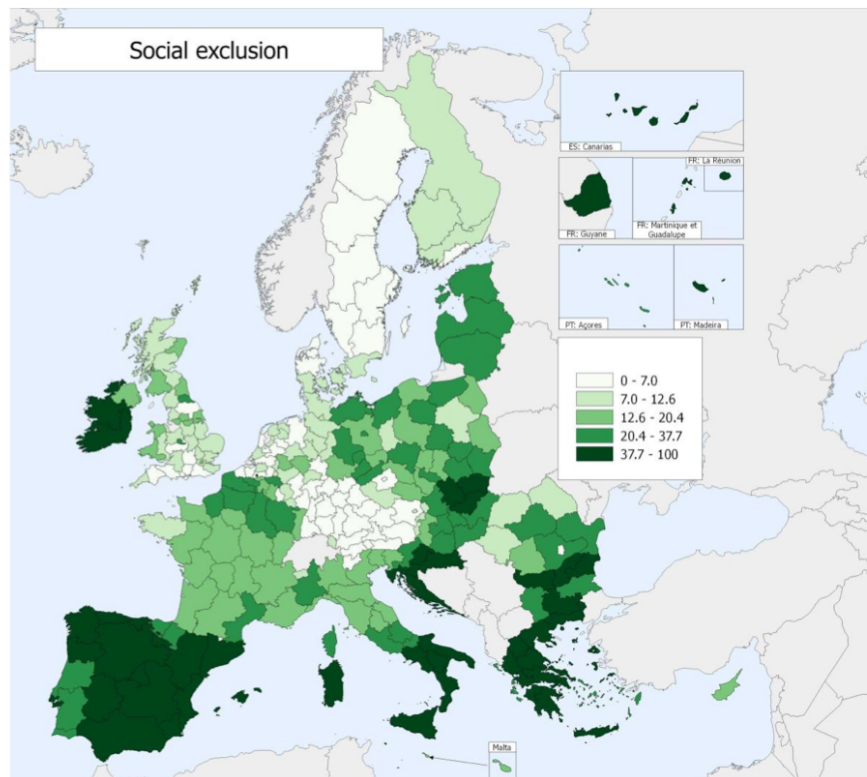
In other words, the tendencies reflected in the most recent data did not arise overnight, nor can they be dismissed as incidental. Taken together, these maps point to a recurring post-2008 configuration in which Mediterranean Europe appears structurally more burdened and more vulnerable than northwestern Europe. In this sense, Mediterranean Europe is not only discursively constructed as a South; it is also socio-economically lived as one. “Southernness” is thus inscribed in the everyday realities of the region.

It is precisely here that the role of contemporary power forces comes into sharp focus. As Trefzer et al. (2014) suggest, global power forces “are felt everywhere” (p. 11) and they actively produce hierarchies within ostensibly coherent worlds. Through fiscal governance, financial conditionality, asymmetrical integration into global markets, and uneven redistribution mechanisms, institutional formations such as the European Union can generate what may be described as “virtual colonies” *within their very own internal environments*.

Figure 5

Spatial Distribution (NUTS 2) of the Social Exclusion Dimension in the EU, 2014

Figure A4. Spatial distribution (NUTS 2) of the social exclusion dimension in the EU (the greener, the worst)



Note: Thresholds correspond to quintiles; the greener colour, the worst conditions

Note. Weziak-Bialowolska, D., Dijkstra, L., & European Commission (Eds.). (2014). *Regional human poverty index: Poverty in the regions of the European Union*. Publications Office of the European Union.
<https://doi.org/10.2788/10063>

These forces are in turn capable of producing structural problems that position certain regions as “Southern” in experiential terms, even if they are not formally classified as part of the Global South. This can be borne out by the fact that social vulnerability, precariousness, and exclusion are repeatedly mapped onto the same axis... The “southernness” elicited in the previous pages thus stands not as a metaphor, but as a lived condition.

In this sense, Mediterranean Europe may be understood as embodying a lived expression of our understanding of “southernness”, thereby warranting its place in what we have named the Virtual Global South. For despite its classification within the *geopolitical* North, it continues to be referred to as “the South of Europe”—and not without reason. This is not simply because it happens, in *geographical* terms, to lie in the southern part of the continent, but because it recurrently occupies an inferior position within the hierarchies of global capitalism. It carries what might be called “*the air of the South*”: an experience of “southernness” that unmistakably marks its place within the contemporary world order.

Conclusion

The present study neither rejected the terminology Global North/Global South, nor devalued its historical and political significance. Rather, the central argument put forward was that, in a world where the capitalist model has become globalised and unequal hierarchies are now

penetrating the very borders that once defined them, these terms are today in dire need of a conceptual extension.

The term Virtual Global South was proposed as such an extension. After the author's realisation that there are common concerns addressed by and shared among scholars that resonate with her own, VGS was born to include and help study and understand all the experiences of "southernness" as worthy of being classified together—even if part of them unfolds within contexts that are considered "privileged" from the outset.

Mediterranean Europe was presented as an illustrative case in point: a space that, despite being institutionally and constitutionally integrated into the so-called "developed" world of the Global North, bears structural characteristics reminiscent of the Global South, namely precariousness, limited autonomous power, and recurrent placement at the lower end of (European) statistical rankings.

Through a combination of the relational, postcolonial, and critical political economy traditions, as well as empirical data, this article has sought to show that inequalities are not only produced between *cosmoi*, but also within them. When social vulnerability is system(at)ically clustered within the same contexts, "southernness" ceases to be a spatial designation and acquires social, political, and economic dimensions.

The proposal of the Virtual Global South does not aspire to resolve global inequalities. It does, however, aspire to improve the way we perceive them. And perhaps, to the extent that understanding precedes change, to contribute to a more equitable recognition of those experiences that have remained unseen until now—the poor of the deep South of the North.

Acknowledgments

The author wishes to express her sincere gratitude to Professor Russel West-Pavlov and Professor Michel Kokoreff for their insightful comments, valuable feedback, and thoughtful suggestions.

Partial financial support was received from the Vereinigung der Freunde der Universität Tübingen (Universitätsbund) e. V., which made the author's participation at the Asian Conference on the Social Sciences 2026 possible.

References

- Alvarez-Galvez, J., Suarez-Lledo, V., Martinez-Cousinou, G., Muniategui-Azkona, E., & Gonzalez-Portillo, A. (2019). The impact of financial crisis and austerity policies in Andalusia, Spain: Disentangling the mechanisms of social inequalities in health through the perceptions and experiences of experts and the general population. *International Journal for Equity in Health*, 18(1), 108. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12939-019-1013-3>
- Badawi, H. (2025). Beyond neocolonialism: Sino-African relations in the 21st century. *Africania-Inönü Üniversitesi Uluslararası Afrika Araştırmaları Dergisi*, 5(2), 140–165.
- Böll, S., & Böcking, D. (2011, May 19). The myth of a lazy Southern Europe: Merkel's clichés debunked by statistics. *Der Spiegel*. <https://www.spiegel.de/international/europe/the-myth-of-a-lazy-southern-europe-merkel-s-cliches-debunked-by-statistics-a-763618.html>
- Brooke-Holland, L. (2024). *What is the Global South?*. House of Commons Library. <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/what-is-the-global-south/>
- Caison, G., & Vormann, B. (2014). The logics and logistics of urban progress: Contradictions and conceptual challenges of the Global North-South divide. *The Global South*, 8(2), 65–83. <https://doi.org/10.2979/globalsouth.8.2.65>
- Campoy-Muñoz, P. , Cardenete, M. A., Miguel-Vélez, F. J. D., & Pérez-Mayo, J. (2022). How does fiscal austerity impact on poverty and inequality? The Spanish case. *Economia Politica*, 39(3), 715–737. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40888-021-00253-5>
- Capucha, L., Estêvão, P., Calado, A., & Capucha, A. R. (2014). The role of stereotyping in public policy legitimation: The case of the PIGS label. *Comparative Sociology*, 13(4), 482–502.
- Chisari, G., & Lega, F. (2023). Impact of austerity programs: Evidence from the Italian national health service. *Health Services Management Research*, 36(2), 145–152. <https://doi.org/10.1177/09514848221134473>
- Dainotto, R. M. (2000). A South with a view: Europe and its Other. *Nepantla: Views from South*, 1(2), 375–390.
- Dainotto, R. M. (2007). *Europe (in theory)*. Duke University Press.
- Dainotto, R. M. (2011). Does Europe have a South? An essay on borders. *The Global South*, 5(1), 37–50. <https://doi.org/10.2979/globalsouth.5.1.37>
- Daley, S. (1999, December 26). Spain rudely awakened to workaday world. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/1999/12/26/world/spain-rudely-awakened-to-workaday-world.html>

- Deleuze, G., & Lapoujade, D. (2025). *Sur l'appareil d'État et la machine de guerre: Cours, novembre 1979-mars 1980*. Les Éditions de Minuit.
- de Sousa Santos, B. (2016). Epistemologies of the South and the future. *From the European South*, 1, 17–29.
- Díaz Gras, E. (2024, October 3). *The Global South: What's in a name?* Brussels Institute for Geopolitics. <https://big-europe.eu/publications/2024-10-03-the-global-south-what-s-in-a-name>
- Dirlik, A. (2007). Global South: Predicament and promise. *The Global South*, 1(1), 12–23.
- European Stability Mechanism. (2019). *Enter the troika: The European Commission, the IMF, the ECB*. Retrieved April 02, 2026, from <https://www.esm.europa.eu/publications/safeguarding-euro/enter-troika-european-commission-imf-ecb>
- Eurostat. (2024). *Living conditions in Europe: Subjective poverty statistics. Statistics Explained*. https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Living_conditions_in_Europe_-_subjective_poverty_statistics
- Eurostat. (2024). *Living conditions statistics at regional level. Statistics Explained*. https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Living_conditions_statistics_at_regional_level
- Fraile, A. M. (2021). Resilient stereotypes in recent crisis novels from Spain. In Barkhoff, J. & Leerssen, J. (Eds.), *National stereotyping, identity politics, European crises* (pp. 247–266). Brill. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004436107_014
- Haraway, D. J. (2016). *Staying with the trouble: Making kin in the Chthulucene*. Duke University Press.
- Harvey, J. T. (2015, July 7). Five reasons why the Greeks were right. *Forbes*. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/johntharvey/2015/07/07/five-reasons-greeks-were-right/>
- Haug, S. (2021). A Thirdspace approach to the 'Global South': Insights from the margins of a popular category. *Third World Quarterly*, 42(9), 2018–2038. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2020.1712999>
- Haug, S., Braveboy-Wagner, J., & Maihold, G. (2021). The 'Global South' in the study of world politics: Examining a meta category. *Third World Quarterly*, 42(9), 1923–1944. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2021.1948831>
- Humphrys, J. (2012, January 7). Proud, but powerless: The Greece that I love. *The Telegraph*. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/greece/8998359/Proud-but-powerless-the-Greece-that-I-love.html>

- Independent Authority for Public Revenue. (2014). *Unified property tax (ENFIA)*. Retrieved February 24, 2026, from <https://www.aade.gr/en/services-information/useful-guides/user-guide-basic-tax-rights-disabled/unified-property-tax-enfia>
- Karanikolos, M., Azzopardi-Muscat, N., Ricciardi, W., & McKee, M. (2022). The impact of austerity policies on health systems in Southern Europe. In Brown, M. & Brigugilo, M. (Eds.), *Social Welfare Issues in Southern Europe* (pp. 119–139). Routledge. <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/edit/10.4324/9780429262678-10/impact-austerity-policies-health-systems-southern-europe-marina-karanikolos-natasha-azzopardi-muscat-walter-ricciardi-martin-mckee>
- Litonjua, M. D. (2012). Third World/Global South: From modernization, to dependency/liberation, to postdevelopment. *Journal of Third World Studies*, 29(1), 25–56.
- López, A. J. (2007). Introduction: The (post) Global South. *The Global South*, 1(1), 1–11.
- Mignolo, W. D. (2011). The Global South and world dis/order. *Journal of Anthropological Research*, 67(2), 165–188. <https://doi.org/10.3998/jar.0521004.0067.202>
- Oxford University Press. (2023). Southernness, n. In *Oxford English dictionary*. Retrieved April 4, 2026, from <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/4577063310>
- Perkins, D. (1975). A definition of caricature and caricature and recognition. *Studies in Visual Communication*, 2(1), 1–24.
- Pop, V. (2011, May 19). Merkel under fire for ‘lazy Greeks ’comment. *EUobserver*. <https://euobserver.com/68413/merkel-under-fire-for-lazy-greeks-comment/>
- Quarta, S. (2025). Evolving poverty in Italy: Individual changes and social support networks. *Societies*, 15(7), Article 193. <https://www.mdpi.com/2075-4698/15/7/193>
- Roberts, M. (2013, September 23). Time’s up for siestas, delayed meetings and late nights, Spaniards told in effort to make them work better. *The Telegraph*. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/spain/10329093/Times-up-for-siestas-delayed-meetings-and-late-nights-Spaniards-told-in-effort-to-make-them-work-better.html>
- Sajed, A. (2020, July 27). From the Third World to the Global South. *E-International Relations*. <https://www.e-ir.info/2020/07/27/from-the-third-world-to-the-global-south/>
- Schlamp, H.-J. (2012, July 30). Southern Europe plagued by corruption and political mismanagement. *Der Spiegel*. <https://www.spiegel.de/international/europe/southern-europe-plagued-by-corruption-and-political-mismanagement-a-847229.html>
- Serapioni, M., & Hespanha, P. (2019). Crisis and austerity in southern Europe: Impact on economies and societies. *e-cadernos CES*, 31. <https://journals.openedition.org/eces/4068>

- Sparke, M. (2007). Everywhere but always somewhere: Critical geographies of the Global South. *The Global South*, 1(1), 117–126.
- Stoiciu, V. (2012, February 13). Lazy Greeks, a neo-liberal cliché. *Voxeurop*. <https://voxeurop.eu/en/lazy-greeks-a-neo-liberal-cliche/>
- Trefzer, A., Jackson, J. T., McKee, K., & Dellinger, K. (2014). Introduction: The Global South and/in the Global North: Interdisciplinary investigations. *The Global South*, 8(2), 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.2979/globalsouth.8.2.1>
- Trumble, D. (2013, August). *All you can eat* [Cartoon of the Month]. *W-T-W*. <https://www.w-t-w.org/en/david-trumble/>
- Van Vossole, J. (2016). Framing PIGS: Patterns of racism and neocolonialism in the Euro crisis. *Patterns of Prejudice*, 50(1), 1–20. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0031322X.2015.1128056>
- Weziak-Bialowolska, D., Dijkstra, L., & European Commission (Eds.). (2014). *Regional human poverty index: Poverty in the regions of the European Union*. Publications Office of the European Union. <https://doi.org/10.2788/10063>
- Wodak, R. (Ed.). (1989). *Language, power and ideology: Studies in political discourse*. John Benjamins Publishing Company.
- World Bank. (2024). *The world by income and region* [Interactive map]. World Development Indicators. Retrieved December 14, 2025, from <https://datatopics.worldbank.org/world-development-indicators/the-world-by-income-and-region.html>
- World Population Review. (2026). *Global South countries 2026*. Retrieved January 25, 2026, from <https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/global-south-countries>
- Wyatt, P. (2024, June 25). Forget Tacitus and Cicero, modern Italian men just want to be lazy. *The Telegraph*. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/columnists/2024/06/25/modern-italian-men-lazy-tacitus-and-cicero/>

Contact email: marianefeligiannia@gmail.com