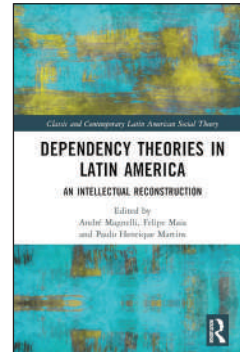


# Dependency Theories in Latin America: An Intellectual Reconstruction

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## Introduction

*Dependency Theories in Latin America: An Intellectual Reconstruction* is an ambitious exploration of one of Latin America's most distinctive contributions to social theory. The volume examines the intellectual origins and development of dependency theories and offers a comprehensive reconstruction of their historical development and contemporary relevance. The book is divided into three parts. The first part traces the historical and systematic perspectives that have shaped dependency thinking. The second part looks at the reception of the debate in other intellectual traditions, and the third part extends these theories to pressing global issues such as post-colonialism, the environmental crisis and the energy transition. Through this multidimensional approach, the editors and authors provide both an introduction

for newcomers and an analysis for scholars familiar with the topic.

At its core, the book argues that dependency theories in Latin America emerged not only as a critique of modernisation, but also as an alternative framework for understanding the region's structural position in global capitalism. The volume emphasises the pluralistic and contested nature of the idea of dependency and highlights its engagement with Marxist, developmentalist and decolonial perspectives. The intellectual trajectories of figures such as Celso Furtado, Fernando Henrique Cardoso and Aníbal Quijano are examined, as well as how these theories have influenced or been challenged by other global debates. Particular attention is paid to how the idea of dependency has been revisited in the light of contemporary challenges such as economic globalisation, political

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upheaval and ecological crises. More than a historical overview, however, *Dependency Theories in Latin America* attempts to situate these ideas within broader global debates on social theory. The book not only revisits an important intellectual tradition, but also invites the reader to rethink the ways in which knowledge circulates between the global North and South. This volume is essential reading for Latin American scholars, political economists and international development experts, as well as policymakers who want to engage with alternative perspectives on global inequalities.

## **The Historical and Systematic Perspectives**

The first part of *Dependency Theories in Latin America* offers a historical and systematic reconstruction of the origins and development of dependency theory in Latin American social thought. The section is divided into three key chapters that analyse the emergence of dependency theories, the intellectual and political trajectories of their main proponents and the theoretical framework underlying this school of thought.

The book contextualises dependency in the longer historical development of Latin American thought and shows that concerns about economic subordination date back to the late 19th century, when intellectuals debated issues of “Mental Emancipation” and “Second Independence.” In the mid-20th century, these discussions were transformed by

the post-war decolonisation movements and the rise of structuralist economics, which saw underdevelopment not as a lack of modernisation but as an active consequence of global economic structures. The book analyses how dependency emerged as a critical response to modernisation theory and structuralist economics, particularly through the work of the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (CEPAL/ECLAC) and key figures such as Raúl Prebisch. Prebisch’s 1949 study introduced the idea that the world economy is structurally divided into an industrialised “centre” and an export-dependent “periphery” that is limited to the production of natural resources. The countries of the periphery were, therefore, confronted with an unequal distribution of the benefits of technological progress. Their terms of trade deteriorated and they had to export more in order to import the same amount of industrial goods, as technological progress benefited the industrialised countries.

In view of the underdevelopment, the structuralists initially proposed import substitution industrialisation (ISI) as a solution. But in the 1960s, a new generation of thinkers – particularly those around Fernando Henrique Cardoso, Enzo Faletto and Theotonio dos Santos – began to criticise the limits of ISI. They argued that national economic policies alone were not able to overcome structural dependencies that were reinforced by internal class structures and international capital flows. This marked a shift from purely economic

explanations to an integrated analysis of politics, class relations and historical structures and positioned dependency theory as an interdisciplinary field.

The Brazilian military coup of 1964 and the increasing radicalisation of Latin American politics drove many intellectuals to the CEPAL-affiliated research centres in Chile, where interdisciplinary debates flourished. Under the government of Salvador Allende, Santiago became a hub for Latin American intellectual production, fostering a dynamic academic circuit that combined economic analysis, sociology and political theory. In addition, dependency theorists exchanged ideas with international academic circles and integrated their ideas into broader debates on global capitalism, imperialism and post-colonial theory.

In any case, there were intense theoretical debates during this period, especially on the question of whether dependency was primarily an external or internal phenomenon. While some scholars, such as André Gunder Frank, emphasised a rigid centre-periphery structure, others, such as Cardoso and Faletto, argued for a more contingent, historically specific approach that left room for national political agency. This tension between structural determinism and political agency remains a central theme of the book and shows how dependency theory has been shaped by both historical analysis and contemporary struggles over Latin America's economic future. Not to mention the personal and professional careers of the most

important dependency theorists. Garcia Jr. meticulously reconstructs the collaborative yet sometimes contradictory relationship between Furtado and Cardoso, highlighting their shared academic careers at ECLAC and their divergent paths in the context of Brazilian political history.

Interestingly, Andre Magnelli introduces the concept of a “constellation” of dependency ideas and argues that dependency should not be understood as a single, unified theory, but as a dynamic intellectual field that encompasses different interpretations. He distinguishes, for example, between the structuralist-industrialist school (associated with Furtado, Fernando Henrique Cardoso and Enzo Faletto) and the socialist-revolutionary strand (represented by André Gunder Frank, Theotonio dos Santos and Vania Bambirra). By outlining the theoretical overlaps and ideological divergences within dependency studies, the chapter promotes a more nuanced understanding of how these theories have evolved in relation to the global political economy and contemporary development debates. Overall, the book presents dependency theory as a plural and evolving intellectual tradition rather than a monolithic framework. It provides an argument for the continuing relevance of dependency theories in contemporary social science debates.

To summarise, the first part of *Dependency Theories in Latin America* provides an insightful overview of the origins and internal dynamics of dependency thinking. In doing so, it

helps to raise further questions: Did a broader engagement and influence with intellectual traditions from other non-Latin American regions, particularly from the South, take place? How have dependency theories been applied in recent decades, challenged by financialisation, global value chains and the rise of China as an alternative development model? Is dependency theory still a useful analytical tool today or does it need to be fundamentally revised to take account of changing socio-economic dynamics?

### **Reception and Dialogues with Other Intellectual Traditions**

The second part of the book examines how dependency theory has been received, criticised and reinterpreted in the various intellectual traditions of the world. A central theme in this section is the contrast between the Latin American and European reception of the idea of dependency. While in Latin America dependency theory was closely linked to concrete political struggles and political debates, its reception in Western Europe was characterised by misunderstandings and criticism of its alleged reductionism and economism. Many European academics, who were frequently confronted with André Gunder Frank's formulations, dismissed dependency theory as too deterministic and neglected its socio-political and historical dimension. However, this rejection was not purely intellectual, but was also characterised by historical events such as the decline of progressivist movements and the rise of neoliberalism,

which pushed development debates into the background.

Beyond Europe, the book sheds light on the global circulation of ideas of dependency and their adaptation to other contexts, particularly in Africa and Asia. Studies of dependency in Africa reveal parallels between Latin American and African experiences, particularly in relation to the historical development of colonial domination and postcolonial economic subordination. Some African scholars engaged directly with Latin American dependency thinking, while others adapted these ideas into a regionally specific critique of global capitalism. In Asia, dependency perspectives were often subsumed under broader development studies, but the book points to the continuing relevance in critiques of financial globalisation and trade imbalances. At the same time, some scholars rejected dependency theory in favour of theories that emphasised successful industrialisation in East Asia, arguing that global integration could help rather than hinder development.

Unsurprisingly, the dialogue between dependency theory and original and more independent thinkers or other critical traditions, particularly world-systems analysis and decolonial thought, is a central theme in this section. The book examines how Immanuel Wallerstein's world-systems theory builds on the insights of dependency theory, overcoming the nation-state as the primary unit of analysis. Wallerstein's framework of core, semi-periphery and periphery expanded

dependency theory, but also shifted its focus to historical capitalism as a global system, leading to collaboration and critique between dependency theorists and world systems scholars. Another important dialogue explored in the book is with decolonial theory, particularly the work of Aníbal Quijano, who expanded the dependency perspective to include issues of ethnicity, coloniality and epistemic dependency. The book highlights how decolonial theorists criticised dependency theory for its economic focus while recognising its fundamental role in the postcolonial critique of global inequality.

It is worth saying a few words about some independent thinkers who engaged in an intense dialogue with the main figures of dependency thinking, but who maintained a significant, rich and fruitful autonomy. Their trajectories could inspire further analysis following the example of this book.

Albert O. Hirschman, for example, did not explicitly belong to the dependency school, but was already concerned with similar concerns regarding structural obstacles to development at an early stage. With his work “National Power and the Structure of Foreign Trade”, published in 1945, Hirschman is one of the “grandfathers” of dependency theories, which deal with how foreign trade influences power relations. His ideas on unbalanced growth and the role of interdependence in economic development offered an alternative to both orthodox modernisation theories (such as those of Walt Rostow) and

dependency-inspired approaches. His influence is particularly relevant in the context of ‘possibilism’, i.e. the political economy and reforms that could actually be implemented to mitigate structural conditions through strategic economic and political choices. Hirschman’s difference was not merely theoretical, but had significant practical implications, influencing whether scholars and policymakers favoured revolutionary or reformist approaches to overcoming dependency. The tension between structural determinism and political agency reflects broader debates in the Latin American social sciences.

Another example is Jorge Katz. He, too, is not directly associated with dependency theory, but his work enriches the debate by focussing on industrial and technological transfer in the context of economic subordination. Katz has emphasised that the region’s ability to adopt and adapt technologies is crucial to overcoming structural constraints. He argues for a more integrated view of development that recognises the interdependence of different sectors of the economy. His work shows that the mere acquisition of foreign technology is not enough if the local population is unable to adopt, adapt and innovate. Katz argues that the main source of technological advantage for subsidiaries is often the technological stock and knowledge base of the parent company, rather than the subsidiary’s own domestic achievements, which constitute a decisive advantage. Katz, therefore, emphasises adaptive technological activities such as

learning by doing, engineering design, and incremental innovation, rather than focusing exclusively on basic research. These activities enable companies to master existing technologies, adapt them to local conditions and develop their own competitive advantages. This perspective develops links between macro- and microeconomic policies for industrial modernisation and self-sustaining growth. It challenges some simplistic dependency frameworks by showing that domestic economic policies, technological capabilities and local agencies play crucial roles in overcoming structural constraints.

Ultimately, this part of the book presents dependency theory as a dynamic and evolving intellectual tradition that is in constant dialogue, adaptation, and critique in different disciplines and regions. Although it has lost prominence in mainstream debates with the rise of neoliberal globalisation, its central insights remain relevant in contemporary discussions of global inequalities, financial dependency and neo-extractivism. The book argues that dependency is not a static theory of the 1960s and 1970s, but a living framework that is constantly being challenged and reinterpreted by new generations of scholars and activists around the world. Given the specific focus of the development co-operation review, the book offers an interesting proposal for future work. It invites further consideration of the role of non-Latin American, southern influences on the idea of dependency. How have African and Asian development writers contributed to

expanding the ability to fully contextualise theories of dependency within a broader global critique of modernisation?

## **Extending Dependency Theories to Global Issues**

The third part of *Dependency Theories in Latin America* examines how dependency theory can be applied to current global issues such as the environmental crisis and the energy transition. A central argument is that dependency is not just an economic condition, but an ongoing process linked to global power structures, including those that determine environmental and climate policy. The book shows how the ecological crisis and the geopolitics of energy have reinforced old patterns of resource extraction and economic subordination, often in new forms. Latin America, historically positioned as a supplier of raw materials, now finds itself at the centre of ‘green extractivism’, where the push into clean energy technologies — such as lithium mining for electric vehicles — reproduces rather than breaks dependency dynamics. The authors discuss the emergence of a “decarbonisation consensus” that, while touted as a solution to the climate crisis, would deepen inequalities between North and South.

An important theme in this section is the overlap between postcolonialism and dependency theory, particularly through the lens of decolonial thinking. Some contributors argue that coloniality remains embedded in contemporary global governance and determines the ways in which environmental policies,



financial mechanisms and technological innovations are implemented in Latin America. They examine how global environmental agreements often reinforce asymmetrical power relations in which the Global South is expected to adhere to preconceived frameworks that do not take into account its historical role in sustaining global economic growth. The book criticises ‘green colonialism,’ in which sustainability narratives are used to justify new forms of economic control that draw on historical patterns of land and resource appropriation. Concepts such as “eco-social transitions” and “energy sovereignty” are proposed as counter-discourses that argue in favour of development models that prioritise social justice, indigenous rights and democratic control over natural resources.

The section, therefore, looks at the political and institutional dimensions of eco-social transitions and questions whether existing states and international organisations are capable of facilitating truly transformative policies. It criticises the ‘technocratic green transition’ driven by multinational corporations and financial institutions and argues that many climate policies repeat the same market-driven logic that caused the crisis in the first place. Rather than promoting a top-down transition, the book emphasises grassroots movements advocating for energy democracy, agroecology and post-extractivist economic models. The discussion goes beyond Latin America and draws parallels with African and Asian struggles against extractivist economies, emphasising the idea that

dependency is a global and not just a regional phenomenon.

Ultimately, this section of the book argues that dependency theory remains a crucial analytical tool for understanding contemporary global inequalities, particularly in the context of climate change and resource governance. While modernisation narratives suggest that technology and market mechanisms will solve environmental crises, the authors argue that without structural changes in global economic relations, the transition to sustainability will become another phase of dependency rather than a break with it. Integrating insights from decolonial thinking, ecological economics and political ecology, the book argues for rethinking dependency theory in a way that recognises both economic and ecological subordination and offers new perspectives on how the Global South can assert greater autonomy in shaping its future.

## Conclusion

This volume emphasises the continuing relevance of dependency theory for understanding the structural challenges facing Latin America and other regions of the Global South. While there is still considerable debate about the role of external constraints and internal influence, the book shows that scholars agree that dependency is not a static condition, but a dynamic relationship shaped by historical, economic and political forces. Dependency is not simply imposed from outside; it is mediated by domestic class structures, institutional arrangements and patterns of

technological and economic integration. The book underlines that dependency theory remains a crucial framework for analysing persistent inequalities, structural heterogeneity and exclusionary economic models, even as it evolves to incorporate contemporary issues such as financialisation, environmental crises and energy transition.

At the same time, the book challenges conventional dichotomies by showing how internal and external factors are closely linked in shaping development trajectories. It also extends the discussion beyond Latin America by

examining how theories of dependency have been influenced and enriched by intellectual traditions from Africa and Asia. This comparative perspective opens up new ways of rethinking the relevance of dependency theories in an era of multipolar globalisation. By positioning dependency theory as a pluralistic and evolving intellectual tradition rather than a rigid analytical model, this volume not only revisits past debates but also invites further dialogue on how nations in the Global South can achieve greater autonomy over their development trajectories.