

Dependency Theory, Marxism and Social Movements: Tracking the Roots of Latin American Economic Thought

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Abstract: The main goal of the present paper is to elaborate a historical analysis of Latin American economic thought during the past four decades. The focus will be to discuss the dependency theory, to track the Marxist roots of Latin American economic thought, and to highlight some of the recent studies in Latin America development based on the new social movements literature.

Resumo: O principal objetivo deste trabalho é o de elaborar uma análise histórica sobre o pensamento latino americano ao longo das últimas quatro décadas. O foco de atenção será a discussão da teoria da dependência, as raízes marxistas do pensamento econômico latino americano, além de uma discussão tendo por base os estudos sobre desenvolvimento na América Latina, sistematizados pela literatura sobre os novos movimentos sociais.

I – Introduction

The main goal of the present paper is to elaborate a historical analysis of Latin American economic thought during the last four decades. The focus will be to discuss the dependency theory since it is considered as one of the most comprehensive interpretation of the underdevelopment struggle faced by Latin America economies since colonial times. This school was developed in the early 1960s in response to some criticism to the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America ECLA school of thought.

The reason for focusing on the dependency theory relies on its specific methodological approach, which has some important elements linked to Marx's methodology based on the notion of a dialectical process.

The paper will be divided in the following way. The first part will briefly present three major historical and theoretical approaches concerning international trade between different countries and the possibilities and conditions to have gains from trade.

Section III discusses the original structuralist school (ECLA) and the centre-periphery paradigm in the first sub-section, and the second one elaborates the main issues proposed by the Dependency school. The third sub-section deals with some of the methodological elements, key to understand the dependency theory.

The next section (IV) is related to the Marxist roots in Latin America and it deals with two issues. The first one is to briefly present the mode of production theory since it is considered one of the main Marxist interpretation in the field of development, closely related to developing countries like the ones in Latin America. The second one intends to summarize the Marxist (and Neo-Marxist) critiques to underdevelopment theories, including the dependency theory.

Finally, section V is more investigative in the sense that it tries to highlight some of the recent alternative studies about development in Latin America, known as new social movements (NSM's). The goal is to see if these studies can provide a more practical and fundamental way to understand and overcome some of the gigantic economic and social problems that are still present in these countries despite a huge number of previous studies on the subject.

II – Three Views of International Trade in a Historical Perspective

The issue of international trade and the possibilities of mutual gains from trade have been a constant topic of discussion in the literature about development in Latin America. This section will briefly present three historical views concerning trade among ‘developed’ and ‘developing’ countries.

First, there is the Mercantilist theory of foreign trade. This view has a special relevance to understand the historical development in Latin America especially during colonial times when the colonies were restricted to trade with Spain and Portugal.

It is important to understand that the Mercantilist theory is primarily a theory of state power where the wealth of each nation is directly correlated to the most favorable balance of trade (surplus) that a country can achieve. The reason for this is that the nation will accumulate reserves in the form of gold and silver, which were considered as a crucial part of national wealth. The reason for this is because wealth was measured in terms of money, income was paid in money, and since gold and silver were the most common material used as money, the larger the amount of gold and silver a country has, the higher its wealth.

The relevance of examining Mercantilism to understand the development in Latin America is related to the fact that this theory provided a justification for ‘advanced’ countries to engage in war in order to create and regulate new markets. This element was crucial in order to provide the necessary conditions to improve the wealth through trade and exploitation. Trade in this scenario will play a role in terms of allowing countries to accumulate a surplus and by doing so they will have a higher amount of gold as reserves which is ultimately the indication of wealth of any country. The exploitation element here is due to the fact that the ‘advanced’ economies will use force and political power in order to extract as much gold as they could from the periphery. At the same time the terms of trade was set in such a way to favor the centre vis-à-vis the colonies.

The second view of trade is associated to the Ricardian tradition in economics, and it is based in the theory of comparative advantage. Briefly, this theory says that whenever there is a difference in terms of relative ‘cost’ of production of goods between two (or more) countries, they should engage in international trade since this new situation will result in mutual gains from trade.

The model of comparative advantage predicts that each country will end up specializing in the production of the goods that it has relatively more efficient, ie, lower 'cost' of production. In terms of how this theory was applied in reality in the case of Latin American economies, is that they specialize in the production and export of primary goods and raw materials, where Spain and Portugal have specialized in the production and export of industrialized goods. This was particularly important for Latin America since the end of the XVIII century and it is still part of the economic scenario that one can see at the present moment.

A profound and irreversible critique to the comparative advantage model (Ricardian Tradition) when applied to the reality of Latin America, was probably one of the main contribution provided by the dependency theory. The idea was that in order for Latin American economies to achieve a sustainable long-run economic growth and to industrialize, they couldn't be engaged in international trade with 'advanced' economies only by following the comparative advantage principle. The idea is that this would impose some serious constraints in terms of economic growth and development.

One of the reasons suggested by the dependency theory is that the comparative advantage model and its implication in terms of Latin America specializing in exporting raw material (primary goods) is related to the deterioration of the terms of trade (relative decrease in the price of primary goods). Another element used to criticize the comparative advantage model is the fact that the international trade revenue of most Latin American economies would depend to a large extent to the situation of the international market, which is dictated by the waves of prosperity or recession in the 'advanced' countries. This argument is closely related to the idea that Latin American economies would have a passive role in this scenario, and by doing so the complete dynamic of their growth and development would be dictated by external factors.

The last argument against the comparative advantage model is due to the fact that the specialization in primary goods in Latin America would not give the right incentives to implement the desired modernization of the society, both in the political arena as well as in technological terms.

The economic environment described above is one of the main points of debate and controversy between the conventional theory of international trade based on comparative advantages, and the structuralist (ECLA) and dependency approaches,

regarding the issue of whether or not Latin American economies were getting the promised gains from trade.

Finally, the last view of international trade is the Marxist one based on Lenin's work. Lenin and Marx have an interpretation about imperialism based on the argument that international expansion of the capitalist system will result in significant impact in the 'progress' of pre-capitalist economies, but they emphasize the ambiguity in the role to be played by foreign capital, in specific, financial capital.

Lenin focused his analysis on the issue of how under monopoly capitalism the centre will export financial and industrial capital to the periphery, which is essential to the development of the economic and social relations of production. This will have huge implication for the periphery in terms of establishing a new form of subordination and dependency.

Many 'developmentalists' and dependency authors regarding the discussion of industrialization and the role of multinational corporations have frequently used the analysis elaborated by Lenin. This discussion was closely related to the issue of how Latin American economies were inserted in the world market, which is often advocated to be characterized as dependent and for not been part of the center of decision.

The next section will discuss many issues related to Latin American development that were formulated by the ECLA approach and the dependency theory

III – Dependency Theory: the Dorsal Spine of Latin America

Economic Thought since Early 60's

III.1 – Structuralist Roots (ECLA) and the Centre-Periphery Paradigm

The creation of the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America (ECLA) goes back to late 1940s and early 1950s and it is known as the Latin America structuralist school of thought.

The development of the structuralist approach in Latin America should be considered as part of a heterodox school, which was characterized by creating a body of thought that oppose the orthodox view. The structuralists developed an approach where the world economy is divided between advanced countries (centre) and the underdeveloped economies (periphery).

The ECLA has adopted a very specific analysis in terms of defending some kind of import protection in the periphery since according to this school the distribution of the gains from trade was biased in favor of the centre and against the periphery. At the same time the ECLA School has proposed an increase in the level of regional integration in Latin America as the way to break the vicious circle of poverty and deterioration of income distribution. Regional integration was also advocated as an important step to solve the problem of efficient scale of production and the relative small markets for most Latin America economies.

The structuralist school (ECLA) also emphasized the issue that the periphery economies face problems related to the generation of surplus labor by the large heterogeneous sector of the economy, which has low productivity, resulting in downward pressure in the wages. The idea is that the periphery and the dynamics of the economy were based in low productivity given the low level of technology and investment. This element together with an enormous population growth will have implications in terms of creating a large surplus labor (excess of supply of labor) and therefore pushing real wages down.

The centre-periphery concept used by the structuralists embodies the idea that the structure of production in the periphery is heterogeneous and specialized. The idea of heterogeneity was linked to the argument that countries in the periphery have

sectors with old technologies and low productivity (agriculture) and others with high technology and high productivity (textiles and mining). The specialized structure of production of the periphery, was related to the fact that its exports are restricted to a few primary products and also because those economies do not face a high degree of integration and diversification of production.

The centre as opposed to the periphery has production structures, which is relatively homogeneous and diversified allowing them to have an advantageous insertion in the world market when trading with countries from the periphery. This happens in terms of the advanced economies having a higher number of products to commercialize which helps them in order to satisfy different intensities over time for the international demand for their products.

The advantageous insertion of the centre in the world market when compared to the case of the economies from the periphery can also be related with the discussion about specialization according to the principle of comparative advantage. This scenario was criticized by many Latin American authors in terms of pointing out to elements like the deterioration of the terms of trade and the increasing economic dependency.

The problem of deterioration in the terms of trade over time for the countries that were primarily exporters of primary goods and raw materials is linked to the historical decrease in the relative export price of primary goods. Countries from the periphery usually face significant movements (decrease) in the international price of their exports during periods of recession and due to the fact that those products have high elasticity of demand for imports. After all, primary goods exporting countries generally face negative movements in price of their exports and are easy prey of international price fluctuations without having the power to revert such trend since the dynamics of the market is dictated by economies that export manufactured goods.

The early 1960s in Latin America were a period known as a period of pessimism characterized by a stagnationist view and by some concern about the efficiency of the import-substitution industrialization (ISI) policies in terms of overcoming underdevelopment. It is exactly within this scenario that the Dependency Theory has emerged with some innovative concepts and methodology to understand the struggle of the underdeveloped countries. This issue is the next subject of the present paper.

III.2 – The Dependency School of Thought

The dependency theory is an analysis of the development in Latin America that incorporates some important sociological elements to understand the struggle faced by most of the economies in that region. It was also innovative in both theoretical and methodological grounds compared to the approach proposed by the structuralist (ECLA) school, by proposing a new interpretation of the underdevelopment in Latin America.

Dependency theory in Latin America has its roots linked to the structuralist school (ECLA) of thought but during the 1960s it faced a rupture. On one side there was the developmentalists and on the other the new born dependency theory.

The concept of dependency is a key one in the sense that the dependency school was able to realize that the peripheral economies remain dependent even if they are not restricted to the production and export of raw materials. This happens because the production of capital goods by itself cannot guarantee the technological and financial conditions to ensure the breakdown of the dependency element, which is intrinsically present in their relationship with the advanced capitalist countries.

The concept of dependence has different meanings, where one of the most used one is the following:

“Dependence is a conditioning situation in which the economies of one group of countries are conditioned by the development and expansion of others. A relationship of interdependence between two or more economies or between such economies and the world trading system becomes a dependent relationship when some countries can expand through self-impulsion while others, being in a dependent position, can only expand as a reflection of the dominant countries, which may have positive or negative effects on their immediate development” (Dos Santos, 1970, p.289-290)

Dependency theory was primarily a new and critical theory of development based on historical elements faced by economies from the periphery. One can see this by examining Frans Schuurman (1993) analysis by considering the dependency theory and how does it brings to the surface the discussion about development:

1. Underdevelopment is not a condition intrinsic to the Third World; it is a historical process.

2. The capitalist system consists of the union between dominant and dependent countries.
3. Underdevelopment is a result of the specific way that the world economy is organized.

One of the distinctive aspects of the dependency theory was the argument that in each of the Latin American economies there was the presence of capitalism in its mercantilist form. The accumulation sphere in this context is based on the trade of goods and not in the production as we have in the more advanced stages of capitalism.

According to this approach, capitalism was the dominant system even in situations primarily characterized by slavery or exploitation of indigenous communities. This scenario can be primarily related to colonial times in most Latin American economies when trade between the centre and the periphery was basically the main source of income, when the economic and social relations were still being developed to reach capitalism in its most developed form.

Another innovative aspect proposed by the dependency school relates to how they view the relation between foreign interests and some local classes by arguing that common values and interests ultimately unified them. This is clear when they examine how the foreign capital and the conservative domestic oligarchy get together in terms of imposing their interests as the dominant one for almost all Latin American countries in different moments of history.

The dependency theory was responsible to impose a rupture in Latin America economic thought, which can be traced by the following argument:

“The more pessimistic ‘stagnationist’ views of the early 1960’s, and especially the economic, social and political phenomena that largely inspired them, led to important changes in development thinking in Latin America (...) in addition to the conservative criticism and installation of military governments mentioned earlier, there was also increasing criticism of ECLA from the left – including accusations of vagueness, prolixity and eclecticism on crucial issues. This eventually led to a schism between the more radical ‘dependency’ school and the ‘developmentalist’ approach of ECLA, as it was referred to by the dependency writers.” (Oman and Wignaraja, 1991, p.153)

After the discussion regarding the dependency theory and its impact in Latin America economic development, it is necessary to introduce the methodological elements of this approach since this is an intrinsic part of the theory.

III.3 – Methodological Considerations

In terms of the present paper and its goals, it is crucial to understand the Marxist method and see how this is closely related to the method used by the dependency theory, since both were developed by emphasizing the relevance of historical elements in a dialectic framework.

The dependency theory adopts a methodological approach that emphasizes the socio-political dimension of the economic relations of production, and this is one point that is close to Marx's critique of the capitalist economy. One can see this by the following argument:

“This methodological approach, which found its highest expression in Marx, assumes that the hierarchy that exists in society is the result of established ways of organizing the production of material and spiritual life. This hierarchy also serves to assure the unequal appropriation of nature and of the results of human work by social classes and groups. So we attempt to analyze domination in its connection with economic expansion.” (Cardoso and Faletto, 1979, pp.IX).

Cardoso and Faletto (1991) use the dialectical approach to study the structures of Latin American societies and how they change over time, understanding first and foremost that these social structures are the result of the behavior of each individual who are part of these economies. The idea was to examine the reality of Latin America in its social and economic dimensions, and then to develop a theory that is able to propose a new understanding based on historical elements. This was like going from concrete to abstract, and then back to concrete analysis.

The approach adopted by most of the authors from the dependency theory is to put emphasis in the historical transformation of the social structures, which will be a result of the class struggles, conflict of interests and social movements. This is also another point where this school is closely related to Marx.

It is also important to notice that by examining the social structures of Latin American societies, the authors of the dependency theory are trying to show the existence of a unique process where coexists mechanisms of self-perpetuation of the structure of domination and the possibility for change. In this sense one can consider

this analysis as having a peculiar dynamic process that requires the understanding of the historic and political dimension embodied in each of the Latin American economies.

The dependency school also has the merit of doing an analogy between the concepts of capital used by Marx, as a result of class exploitation, and how this can put light in terms of understanding the dynamics of the capitalist society. The argument is that the capitalist system and its logic of accumulation require class exploitation, where capital is the ultimate instrument and representation of this form of exploitation.

Another similarity between the methodological approach adopted by the dependency school and the Marxists is that both move from an abstract analysis to a concrete one (dialectic method). This can be clearly understood by the following statement:

“This is the methodological movement constituting what is called the passage from an ‘abstract’ style of analysis in to a ‘concrete’ form of historical knowledge. In that sense, the history of capital accumulation is the history of class struggles, of political movements, of the affirmation of ideologies, and of the establishment of forms of domination and reactions against them.” (Cardoso and Faletto, 1979, p.XVIII)

The methodological lesson learned by the dependency theory from Marx is essentially related to the idea that using historical elements and the conflict of class in Latin America it is possible to unmake and overcome the conventional concept of development that dominated the debate during the 1960s. This element plays a crucial role for the dependency theory in terms of proposing a reinterpretation of why Latin American economies have struggle for such a long time.

After this brief discussion of the methodology behind the dependency school it is time to examine one of the Marxist interpretation about the issue of underdevelopment, and the some of the Marxist critiques towards the dependency school and more specifically to the approach developed by Andre Gunder Frank.

IV – Marxism in Latin America

One dominant view among the Marxists is that capitalism and imperialism are considered a major cause of underdevelopment in the periphery. In order to understand this, it is necessary to look at the conflict of interests among countries and classes, as well as the exploitation that is imposed by the advanced capitalist economies to the periphery.

One main criticism that the Marxists directed at the dependency theory and in particular at Andre Gunder Frank, is that it is not accurate to consider the Latin American economic system as capitalist since colonial times. The traditional Marxist argument is that it is essential to understand not only that there was appropriation of the surplus value, but in which forms and how it was appropriated. Latin America societies have experienced a particular mode of exchange since colonial times that allows for a specific form of surplus value appropriation, but this cannot be confused as the capitalist mode of production.

The appropriation of the surplus value in Latin American economies was primarily related to the sphere of commercialization (international trade) and not through the sphere of production, which is the key element to define the capitalist mode of production. The relation between capital and the labor force was historically unique, where the wage did not play a role during colonial times. Under these circumstances, capital from the centre made extensive use of labor force in its slavery form.

Marxists consider the proletarianisation of labor as the main characteristic of capitalism. This specific situation is characterized by the idea that workers lose control over their unique 'asset' (labor force) and they are unable to see the existence of a process characterized by the exploitation of the labor force by the capital.

The mode of production theory disagrees with Andre Gunder Frank to whom the cause of underdevelopment in Latin America economies was the transfer of surplus from the periphery to the centre. The mode of production theory argues that underdevelopment was rather an outcome of the social relations and class structure that was present in the periphery.

The main proposition adopted by the 'development-of-underdevelopment' approach was to suggest that the only way to break the vicious circle of poverty and underdevelopment is through the socialism. This argument is related to the idea that

the development of capitalism in the periphery would result in exploitation given the kind of insertion of Latin American economies in the world market, characterized by subordination in both economic and political terms.

The Marxist view is that this analysis is unable to see the existence of class conflict and pre-capitalist modes of production in Latin America, which is essential to understand the nature of the exploitation and the power structure behind the centre-periphery economic system. According to this theory, the form of surplus value appropriation characteristic of Latin American economies since colonial times was based on the circulation sphere through the trade process, which is different from the capitalism mode of production where the focus should be on the production side.

There is also some discordance between Marxist (traditional view) and Neo-Marxists in terms of the definition of modes of production. According to the former Marx's concept of modes of production is to be used on a national level and it is not possible to have two modes of production at a point in time, which is not corroborated by Neo-Marxists.

Although most of the Marxist critique was directed to the 'development-of-underdevelopment' current by arguing that it does not incorporate class relations in the center of its analysis, the dependency theory received some criticism in terms of having overextended the notion of social class.

V – Social Movements in Latin America: where it stands?

It is important to establish the connection between this section and our present work. Social movements in Latin America can be considered as one of the only representations (social, political and economic) characterized by elements that were crucial in the development of the dependency theory with a Marxist flavor. These elements can be seen in terms of contesting the status quo and the whole notion of development, as well as in terms of trying to overcome the ‘old’ (and more new than ever) dependence of Latin American societies relative to the ‘advanced’ economies.

Social movements are not linked to the dependency theory by formal academic concepts, but by realizing that the only way out of the dependency trap is to look inwards (each Latin America society) and find its own way to overcome poverty, inequality, and exploitation, among other issues. It is also another way of showing that Latin America cannot rely upon theories that ‘fall from the skies’, usually proposed by academics and politicians from the ‘first’ world. Understanding how the capitalist system works and its logic of exploitation interconnect social movements, Marxism and the dependency theory. At this level, they all have a revolutionary dimension impregnated to them.

Some of the recent new studies about development in Latin America based on local social movements (NSM’s) and specific demands from the people living under terrible social conditions, can be consider as part of a strong disagreement towards the conventional approaches, quite often based on the following elements:

- The idea that more modernization is necessarily an improvement in both social and economic terms
- First World societies are considered as model (reference)
- Does not consider the ‘Third World’ ability to define its own standards and limits of “progress”.
- Identify "modernization" and "progress" with attributes of the First World
- Rank countries on comparative spectrum from least to most developed (“modern”)

This approach has a revolutionary and a novelty component since it implies in a different way of how and what to analyze in terms of the issues behind the discussion

of development in Latin America. This is certainly an advance in terms of rediscovering issues that are crucial for each Latin America society and that are generally swept under the rug by conventional studies.

It is relevant to understand that one of the most important notions that the new studies on social movements in Latin America can bring to light is the following:

“Social Movements (new and old) in the Third World are not expressions of resistance against modernity; rather, they are demands for access to it.” (Schuurman, 1993, p.27)

The new social movements have developed the argument that the widely accepted approaches about Latin America during the decades of 1960s and 1970s, functionalism and Marxism are limited in terms of explaining the complexity behind the historical evolution of Latin American societies.

The novelty element brought by the studies on new social movements is basically associated with the fact that they incorporate a fundamental transformation in terms of looking at how each local community engages in political practice. In the new political arena one cannot restrict to the old division between bourgeoisie and proletariat, but instead by the existence of distinct number of social actors with different levels of autonomy, in a much more fragmented political scenario.

The new theory does not define social movements only in terms of social and economic categories since it intrinsically embodies cultural and political dimensions. Social movements are often considered as ‘collective identities’, which is the result of a process involving conflict and negotiation among social actors.

The notion of how the local communities struggle to survive given the actual stage and structure of capitalism in Latin America, needs to be reconstructed in order to move in such a way to include noneconomic issues. Under this perspective, the new social movements are playing an important role to challenge previous theories based in the issues of modernization and dependency.

Social movements should also be considered as powerful instruments to move to a more democratic social relation, especially regarding minority issues related to race, gender, and indigenous communities, among others.

The main lesson that one can take from the novelty element introduced by the new social movements can be expressed by the argument below:

“The history of democracy and development in the post-World War II

period has been precisely a history of exclusion for the majority of Latin Americans. The redefinition or dismantling of development will therefore certainly not be the product of government action or the efforts of international organizations such as the IMF or the World Bank. As several of our essays imply, collective actors, who find expression in the region's social movements, represent a tangible hope for imagining and bringing about different means of organizing societies in ways more conducive to genuine improvements in living conditions – both cultural and material.” (Escobar and Alvarez, 1992, p.329)

Somehow it is amazing to see new studies about Latin America going in a different direction from those who still dominates the academia and the international institutions. The main concern is usually associated with the fact that the new ‘voices’ are rarely listened by those who have the power, and maybe one should not expect them to do that because it is contradictory to the actual power structure that dominates Latin America societies.

This does not mean that social movements and conflicts does not matter in terms of changing this situation, but rather that they should rely more on their local social aspirations and less in terms of trying to reconnect to the ‘advanced’ capitalist system and its institutions. This has been already incorporated by many studies about social movements in Latin America and it seems to be in the same direction as the one briefly proposed in this section.

VI - Conclusion

One of the lessons to be learned from the present study is that the dependency theory analysis of the struggle of Latin America development has survived in a strong way during the last two decades, regardless of the criticisms. This has to do with the fact that it has one of the most complete and elaborated framework to understand how these societies have evolved in a historical perspective, by incorporating social and political (power structure) elements that were frequently forgotten by traditional studies. It has also a methodological approach that makes sense when one tries to see the reality faced by Latin American societies where exploitation is a crucial part of its internal and external dynamics.

Part of Marxists criticism of dependency theory can be considered as secondary in the sense that what they have in common is much more significant in terms of the methodology and the way they view and interpret the political economy of the capitalist system. Both analysis have a strong historical component, are based on a dialectical method and they move from an abstract to a concrete analysis of the capitalist system, regardless of the specific socio-economic and political conditions in Latin America used by the dependency school.

Marxism has face a cloudy period since the episodes of the late 1980s in the old Soviet empire and the unification of East and West Germany, both in theoretical terms as well as in the world political arena. In spite of this, Marxism is still alive in terms of providing crucial elements to understand the structure of power, the conflicts and class struggle faced by social actors in developing countries, as one can see by looking at Latin American experiences.

Latin American societies are still one of the most fertile regions in the world regarding its capacity to survive to historical exploitation and continue to create new fields of action for social movements, probably more intense and frequently than anywhere else in the world.

Last but not least, the message from the present analysis of Latin America societies, somehow agrees with the argument developed by a well known Brazilian political scientist, Luciano Martins, who once said that everything has changed but after all, what remains the same is the structure of domination and power. It is time to change this situation and if from no other reason, and there are many, from a moral and ethical standpoint. Perhaps, the only way to do this is to bring back to the

‘picture’ what Latin America economic thought should be about and has been constantly forgotten, the wonderful people who live there.

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