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Introduction: Interrogating the Resurgence of Latin American Dependency Theory

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Introduction

As 2025 draws to a close, we are witnessing a fundamental transformation of the global economy and of the global political order established in the turmoil of the 1970s and '80s. Great Power rivalry, once thought banished by the end of the Cold War, has re-emerged with a vengeance. The 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, and the ongoing proxy war with the USA, suggests that intra-imperialist rivalry is reaching a crucial conjuncture. The rising tide of democratisation since the 1970s has given way to right-wing authoritarian populism. At its most basic level, this transformation of world order is driven by the development of capitalism on a global scale. The rise of China to become by some measures the largest economy in the world, and the formation of the BRICS as an influential grouping of non-Western states, shows a profound shift in the geography of capital accumulation since the 1980s. But the growing significance of China, India, and the constellation of other high-growth economies, has not led to the worldwide convergence promised by advocates of neoliberal globalization. Rather, the emerging world order once again raises the prospect of transformation without convergence that is fundamental to Dependency Theory (Antunes de Oliveira, 2019). As other commentators have noted, the rise of China has done nothing to erase the significance of the 'periphery' for our understanding of the unfolding of global capitalism (Fischer, 2015).

Viewed from Latin America, the parallels between the current era and the original formative period of Dependency Theory are striking. Even as China, India, and other Asian economies move further towards complex industrial manufacturing and technological competition with the West, Latin America faces de-industrialization, a

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return to 'extractivism' based on natural resource exports, combined with persistent poverty and rising inequality, mirroring its position in the early to mid-20th century. In this sense, Latin America remains 'peripheral' in its position within global transformations, while still vital to accumulation elsewhere. Equally, the ebb of the 'Pink Tide' and its replacement by authoritarian populist regimes, such as Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil or Javier Milei in Argentina, evokes the wave of coups and military dictatorships which drove the original intellectuals of Dependency Theory into exile.

The political, social, and economic transformations outlined above have coincided with a renewed interest in Latin American Dependency Theory, both within the continent and beyond. There is no better time than now for an interrogation of the resurgence of Latin American Dependency Theory. This Special Issue of *Alternautas* explores the ongoing significance of this 'view from the periphery' in terms of its historical roots and its novel contemporary transformations. To set the scene for the authors' contributions, I begin by considering the decline of this school of analysis from the 1980s, before outlining the many dimensions of its contemporary resurgence.

The Decline and Resurgence of Latin American Dependency Theory

At its most popular register, Dependency Theory articulated the idea that the political independence of Latin America from colonial rule in the 19th century was not sufficient to break with the plunder of the continent taking place since the 1500s (Galeano, 1997). Rather, the politically independent states of Latin America were still locked in a situation of 'dependency', where their insertion into a hierarchical global economy kept them 'underdeveloped' due to continued siphoning of national wealth to 'developed' countries. This view reflected the common-sense perception that, despite the optimistic predictions of Third World 'modernization' and convergence upon Western industrialized models of capital accumulation, states in Latin America (and elsewhere) fell further behind the First World during the Cold War era.

This perspective drew inspiration both from the Cuban Revolution of 1953-59 as an 'anti-imperialist' break with Western economic domination, and from a critique of the perceived stagnation of the Import Substitution Industrialization platform championed by the Structuralist economists of the United Nations *Comisión Económica para América Latina y el Caribe* (CEPAL). From the perspective of the Western world, and from Anglophone academia, Dependency Theory appeared to frame a simplistic choice for Latin Americans, between 'underdevelopment or revolution' (Frank, 1969).

Though Dependency Theory flourished in Latin America from the late 1960s (and indeed other post-colonial contexts, see *inter alia* Amin, 1972; Bagchi, 1982; Rodney [1972] 2018), the period of global turmoil from the late 1970s through the 1980s coincided with a decline of this school of analysis. The combination of the Third World Debt crisis, with subsequent bailouts on punitive terms by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank, and the collapse of the Soviet Union appeared to foreclose any 'autonomous' or 'revolutionary' development possibilities for Latin America. Equally, Anglophone critics were keen to take Dependency Theory to task for its perceived failures. These intellectual challenges came from across the spectrum of economic and political opinion but coalesced in three major objections. First, from somewhat different angles, Sanjaya Lall (1975) and David Booth (1985) challenged the coherence and practicality of Dependency Theory for empirically verifying that marginalization, poverty, and 'underdevelopment' were due to peripheral countries subordination to the core countries; Second, Robert Brenner (1977) criticized a perceived determinism of 'external' factors related to the global expansion of market exchange and a neglect of 'internal' factors related to social property relations and the class structure of surplus appropriation; Third, through an examination of Taiwan, Alice Amsden (1979) claimed that the rise of the East Asian Tigers from the 1970s onwards proved that there were no insurmountable barriers to peripheral industrialization as a path to dynamic economic growth.

However, as several commentators have observed (Cardoso, 1977; Kay, 1989; Kvangraven, 2021 *inter alia*), the Anglophone engagement with and characterisation of Dependency Theory was flawed, partial, and limited. Andre Gunder Frank's centrality was overemphasised, on the basis of being available in English, despite his limited significance to the Latin American debates and closer association with World Systems Theory. In contrast, Cristóbal Kay (1989) notes the diversity and range of currents of thought brought together in Latin American discussions of Dependency Theory that were mostly conducted in Spanish and Portuguese as opposed to English. This included both 'reformist' and 'Marxist' positions within Dependency Theory, with the former represented by Fernando Henrique Cardoso, Osvaldo Sunkel, and Celso Furtado, and the latter by Theotônio dos Santos, Ruy Mauro Marini, Vânia Bambirra and to a lesser extent Andre Gunder Frank. These camps formed two sides of often fierce debates over how to theorize the challenges faced by Latin American societies and how they might be overcome (See, in particular, Serra & Cardoso, 1978; Marini, 1978). As Kay reveals (1989: Chapter 5), both camps owed significant debts to the Structuralism institutionalised within CEPAL, though more acknowledged by the reformists than the Marxists.

The two camps of Latin American Dependency Theory shared both differences and similarities, and were each at some distance from the oft-caricatured position set out by Andre Gunder Frank (Kay, 1989: Chapter 5). For example, Cardoso (with Enzo Faletto, 1979) argued that dependency did not lead inevitably to stagnation and ‘underdevelopment’, but that ‘associated dependent’ development was possible in specific Latin American contexts based on the balance of class forces and alliances, and the role of the state. Marini argued, albeit from a more critical stance, that the faltering Import Substitution Industrialization programme in Brazil could be renovated through a strategy of ‘sub-imperial’ alignment with the imperial powers at the core of global capitalism combined with domestic fascism. Equally, each camp clearly overcame the accusations that Dependency Theory paid insufficient attention to internal dynamics of class exploitation. Marini’s concept of ‘super-exploitation’, meaning the remuneration of workers in peripheral countries below the value of their labour, shed light on how mechanisms of surplus appropriation work *within* dependent countries as well across the core and periphery. But the differences between the two camps remained significant. Marxist dependency theory was ultimately informed by theories of imperialism as part of the global logic of capital accumulation, as articulated by Hilferding, Luxemburg, and Lenin, and still intimately connected with the revolutionary politics of transition to socialism. Marxist Dependency Theory was thus concerned with reforming Marxism to address the realities of the colonial periphery that were often overlooked in the European canon. Conversely, the ‘reformist’ camp retained a decidedly un-Marxist optimism about the developmental prospects of an alliance between ‘national’ bourgeois forces and workers, while maintaining their critical distance from the Structuralism of CEPAL (*ibid*, 127).

In a prescient comment which anticipated the intellectual sources of the resurgence of Latin American Dependency Theory, Kay (1989) observed that Marini, rather than Frank, was the most central figure in for Marxian Dependency Theory. As such, the publication of Marini’s seminal 1973 work *The Dialectic of Dependency* in English for the first time in 2022 signalled the renewed influence of this current of Latin American thought both beyond and within its region. With the 2024 re-publication of the 1979 English translation of Fernando Henrique Cardoso and Enzo Faletto’s *Dependency and Development in Latin America*, the intellectual stage is set once more for a vigorous debate on how dependency frames the condition and the prospects of Latin America and its position within global capitalism.

The Resurgence of Dependency Theory

As material and intellectual drivers push more authors towards a reconsideration of Dependency Theory, it is an ideal moment to consider how best to frame this approach to capture its diversity, depth, and variation beyond the stereotype favoured by Anglophone critics. Ingrid Kvangraven's (2021) masterful overview of the field is central to this effort, emphasising difference and dialogue in the 'research programme' of Dependency Theory. Her framework outlines that Dependency Theory is characterized by a commitment to four key intellectual propositions: 1.) a global historical approach; 2.) economic theorizing that addresses the polarizing tendencies of capitalist development; 3.) attention to the structures of production; and 4.) attention to the constraints resultant from being a peripheral economy within the global economy (*ibid*, 81). Framing Dependency Theory in this way captures both the 'reformist' and 'revolutionary' currents as outlined by Kay (1989) but also recognizes how new theorizations reinvigorate rather than depart from the Dependency Theory approach.

The contemporary transformations of the global economy, including the rise of China and other Developing and Emerging Economies (DEEs) has motivated the coalescence of another research collective studying the financial structural constraints these countries still face. The emerging critical research agenda on 'subordinate financialisation' unites different tendencies, including radical and more reformist heterodox economists, in a research agenda centred on how the variegated processes of financialisation create barriers to the structural transformation and economic growth of DEEs. Though subordinate financialisation also derives insights from Marxian theories of money and finance, and post-Keynesian analysis of currency hierarchies, it traces a clear lineage to *dependista* analyses of unequal exchange (Alami *et al*, 2023). Equally, analysis of financial subordination is as much concerned with new readings of the history of peripheral dependence as it is with new forms of financialised dependency (*ibid*, 1371-2).

Ruy Mauro Marini's work on dependency in Latin America has proved a vital inspiration to those working on new relations of dependency and development in Africa. Patrick Bond (2015, 2016) argues that, just as South African 'sub-imperial' alignment the West during the Cold War allowed for new accumulation possibilities, so it has repeated this strategy within the contemporary BRICS group. This speaks to a broader research program examining the rise of China and its relationship to African underdevelopment (See, *inter alia*, Taylor, 2016; Carmody, 2020). Equally, the dependency analysis of the rise of China has more recently turned towards Sino-

Latin American relations, including the contrasting and rival dependent relations with the USA (see, *inter alia*, Jenkins, 2012; Stallings, 2020).

Finally, there is once again a vibrant debate within Latin America on the future direction of Dependency Theory. Authors from the continent have attempted to revitalise dependency analysis by reconsidering some of its core assumptions about the development of global capitalism and its functioning in the periphery. Felipe Antunes de Oliveira (2019, 2024) suggests that Marxist Dependency Theory can be reinvigorated via combination with other strands of Marxist thought. His proposal of situating analysis of the politics of dependent states with an understanding of Trotsky's theory of 'uneven and combined development' sheds new light on the dynamics of the 'brown wave' of right-wing authoritarian populism that followed the ebb of Latin America's Pink Tide. Perhaps most visibly, Claudio Katz (2022a, 2022b) has suggested that developments since the 1970s give cause to supplement and revise Marini's core concepts of 'super-exploitation' of peripheral workers, and of 'unequal exchange' between the periphery and core of global capitalism. This has given rise to a fruitful dialogue about the core characteristics of Dependency Theory as a school of analysis. Jaime Osorio (2022), amongst others, argues that to renovate Dependency Theory as proposed by Katz may divorce it from the Marxist analysis that motivated many Latin American thinkers and activists to re-engage theories of dependency in the first place (Ellner, 2024). Conversely, Maristella Svampa (2021) suggests that the return to Dependency Theory in Latin might open up new intellectual combinations beyond the perspective of the Latin American Marxism of the Cold War. Her contribution to the debate raises the prospect of combining Dependency Theory with decolonial, post-developmental, and environmentalist currents in novel ways to face the challenges for contemporary progressive politics.

As global transformations gather pace, and the intellectual debate approaches boiling point, so we turn to the vital contributions of the articles in this Special Issue.

Historical Reflections, Contemporary Analyses, Future Directions

The six articles in this Special Issue form three pairs around critical themes within the resurgence of Latin American Dependency Theory. Each pairing explores the relevant theme from a different angle, encouraging readers to draw out connections, reflections, and divergences in the broader conversation.

The first pair consider the history of Dependency Theory in its original Cold War context to expand our understanding of the richness and variety of material that can be mobilised in the present day. Rafael Teixeira Escórcio Athayde and Tiago Camarinha Lopes re-engage one of the classic debates within Latin American Dependency Theory, in a consideration of responses to Augustin Cueva's (1974)

critique of Marini's *The Dialectics of Dependency* (2022). This contribution resonates strongly with Kvangraven's (2021) framing of Dependency Theory not as the possession of a few individuals but as a Lakatosian 'research programme', where a hard core of key theoretical assumptions are supplemented by a belt of secondary theorizations which deal with challenges, critiques, and anomalies. By emphasizing Vânia Bambirra's (1978) role in framing the collective riposte to Cueva's critique, and defending a specifically Marxist interpretation of dependency, the authors underline the vital role of critical debate in driving the increasing sophistication of Dependency Theory. From another perspective, Pablo Messina explores the often-overlooked Uruguayan contributions to the Dependency Theory research programme. As noted above, historians of the diverse approaches to Dependency Theory tend to split its adherents into 'reformist' and 'radical' tendencies, with the former organized by a critical dialogue with the Structuralism institutionalised in CEPAL, and the latter Marxian Dependency Theory institutionalised in Chile's *Centro de Estudios Socio-Económicos* (CESO) led by Theotônio dos Santos (e.g. Kay, 1989: Chapter 5). Messina's contribution adds a third strand to this orthodox intellectual history, by considering how analysis of the historically specific development of the Uruguayan economy led the *Instituto de Economía* at the University of the Republic (IECON) to insights which prefigure contemporary attempts to reinvigorate Dependency Theory. By exploring historical documents produced through IECON, Messina traces how Uruguayan Dependency Theory analyses the role of ground rent in the cattle industry as a constraint on structural transformation alongside the dynamic of unequal exchange between core and periphery at the global level. This provides a meaningful rebuke to earlier critiques of Dependency Theory as privileging 'external' constraints over the 'internal' structure of national economies, as well as connecting to contemporary attempts to integrate Marxian Ground Rent theory into dependency analysis (e.g. Katz, 2022a).

The second pair of articles provide contemporary analyses, both on the current form of dependency in Latin America, but also the strategies employed by states in situations of dependence. Leandro Bona and Andrés Wainer engage with the debate over subordinate financialisation, also often rendered as 'financial subordination' (Alami *et al.*, 2022), which has particularly strong connections to the work of *dependista* Maria da Conceição Tavares (1985) on the emergence of new forms of dependency via the transformation of the structure of international finance from the 1970s onwards. Bona and Wainer's contribution is framed by case studies of Argentina and Brazil and examines the 'subordinate' character of financialisation in these peripheral economies in terms of household indebtedness, the structure and role of domestic banking, the role of financial rents for non-financial corporations,

and how foreign exchange is affected by currency hierarchies. In many ways, this rich comparative analysis is emblematic of the diversity and nuance of Dependency Theory, and its ability to generate empirically testable hypotheses, in contrast to the reductive caricature in the Anglophone literature. In a complementary analysis also inspired by the work of Ruy Mauro Marini, Dario Clemente makes a detailed exploration of the foreign policy of the ‘neo-developmental’ *Partido dos Trabalhadores* (Workers Party, PT) government which formed part of the Latin American ‘Pink Tide’. Clemente engages Marini’s formulation of ‘sub-imperialism’ as a strategy of peripheral states to manage the pressures of subordination to the core capitalism economies. Rather than opt for a simplistic re-application of Marini’s framework to the present day, Clemente argues that the PT era saw a hybridization between the strategy of sub-imperialism and the so-called ‘quest for autonomy’ long favoured by sectors of Brazil’s foreign policy elite (Vigevani & Cepaluni, 2012). In so doing, the author directs the reader away from simplistic analysis of Brazilian foreign policy as reflecting the interests of a narrow set of ‘comprador’ bourgeois elites and towards a complex theorization of the relations of class forces that give rise to hybrid policy approaches. This in turn shows how Dependency Theory can be employed to illuminate contemporary international political developments without resorting to the simplistic ‘revolution or underdevelopment’ binary.

Our final pair of articles considers the future direction of Dependency Theory as a paradigm for interpreting and transforming Latin American realities. Mariano Féliz engages with an emerging current that seeks to connect Dependency Theory to the analysis of gender-based exploitation (Antunes de Oliveira, 2021; Villegas Plá, 2023). Through this contribution to the debate, Féliz centres the discussion of gender-based exploitation and the distinction between ‘productive’ labour and the work of social reproduction necessary to the continuation of value creation. As Féliz observes, even in Marini’s framing of ‘super-exploitation’ as the foundational concept of Marxist Dependency Theory, the role of reproductive labour, and the forms of exploitation experienced by women, are often obscured or forgotten. Notably, the author suggests that reproductive labour, and exploitation thereof, can be incorporated into Dependency Theory via an engagement with Value Theory and Marxist feminism. Chris Hesketh closes out this Special Issue by arguing for a new step in the dialectic development of Dependency Theory. Similar to Clemente, above, Hesketh roots his analysis of the transformation of Dependency Theory in the material economic, social and political conditions of the Pink Tide, in this case in terms of renewed ‘developmentalism’ in policy frameworks alongside a reversion to extractivism as the focus of economic activity. Hesketh mounts a powerful case for the renewal of Dependency Theory to challenge the rising waves of authoritarian populism and statism in Latin America. To do so, he argues, requires us to abandon the state-

centrism of Dependency Theory in favour of a focus on the *production of space* (Lefebvre, 1991).

Conclusion

The contributions collected above show the vibrancy and exciting prospects of Latin American Dependency Theory. The historical investigation of how this body of work was created and transformed, and the uncovering of new pathways within that exegesis, leads to new directions for future research. The work of these authors heralds the prospect of a revitalized Dependency Theory, which integrates class analysis alongside gender and other forms of marginalization, and connects to the transformation of global finance and new geopolitical realities while considering how the scope of analysis should extend beyond state-centrism and encompass indigenous contributions to Latin American thought.

In closing this introduction to the Special Issue, it is tempting to celebrate the renewed relevance of Dependency Theory for analysis of the contemporary transformations of global capitalism. But this impulse is mistaken. As the contributions to this journal and the broader debate within and beyond Latin America show, Dependency Theory never lost its relevance. All that was lost in the supposed ‘impasse’ and decline of dependency analysis was vital time for further theorization. Instead, I hope that this Special Issue encourages the reader to take account of the mistakes of the past, and to read Latin American debates (and those of other peripheries) in their full depth, variety, and diversity, rather than to settle for partial engagements which foreclose discussion and obscure key contributions. Latin America is a continual source of insights from the periphery into the nature of the world in its totality, and it is for this reason that *Alternautas* journal was established.

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