

4. Whither Dependency Theory?

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This chapter explores the evolution of dependency theory and how it has contributed to other theoretical perspectives, particularly coloniality. It is based on a conversation held with Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni, a renowned scholar based in South Africa.¹⁹ The chapter examines the place of dependency theory in the 21st century and assesses its explanatory powers, pitfalls, and the contribution that it continues to make. Ndlovu-Gatsheni is a professor, the founding Head of the Archie Mafeje Research Institute for Applied Social Policy (AMRI) and currently the Director for Scholarship at the Change Management Unit (CMU) in the Vice-Chancellor's Office at the University of South Africa (UNISA).²⁰ His publications deal with a wide range of issues including empire, colonialism, imperialism, development, citizenship, identity, nationalism and decolonisation.²¹

The Explanatory Power of Dependency Theory

While dependency theory seems to have lost its momentum today, Ndlovu-Gatsheni indicates that this is not the case. He observes that dependency theory remains a critical point of departure in understanding the experiences of Latin America, Africa and other ex-colonies. Ndlovu-Gatsheni explains that, during its inception, dependency theory successfully countered modernisation theory's naturalisation of the African, Latin American and Asian state of underdevelopment as a necessary stage. In the process, modernisation theory also exonerated the colonial powers from contributing to these regions' underdevelopment. Dependency theory's intervention is critical for demonstrating that the economic condition of Africa, Latin America and Asia was not

¹⁹ The conversation with Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni was held over Skype on 1 July 2016.

²⁰ Ndlovu-Gatsheni is also the founder of Africa Decolonial Research Network (ADERN) based at the University of South Africa. He is a National Research Foundation (NRF) rated social scientist; a member of the Academy of Science of South Africa (ASSAf); a Fellow of African Studies Centre (ASC) in the Netherlands; and a Research Associate at the Ferguson Centre for African and Asian Studies at The Open University in the United Kingdom.

²¹ See <http://www.unisa.ac.za/default.asp?Cmd=ViewContent&ContentID=28181>, accessed 23 September 2016.

natural but a product of historical encounters with Euro-North American civilisation as early as the 15th century. Dependency theory argues that the historical encounters between Euro-North America and those other regions sowed the seeds of underdevelopment by siphoning off natural and human resources. This is what has created *coloniality*, a global power structure sustained by asymmetrical power relations, hegemonic epistemology, racial hierarchization of human species, and an exploitative world economy. Ndlovu-Gatsheni argues that the explanatory power of dependency theory, instead of diminishing, has actually been appropriated and developed to construct other useful theoretical frameworks. As will be shown later in the discussion, coloniality/decoloniality as a theory and an approach to understanding Africa's state is partly built on the explanatory framework of dependency theory.

Ndlovu-Gatsheni underscores that Walter Rodney, like several other dependency theorists, popularised and expanded on dependency theory by using the African example in his book *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*. In it, Rodney demonstrates that the bad state of affairs in Africa is a product of historical encounters and processes that she went through as a result of her interaction with Europe. Europe's development was itself assisted by its colonisation of the bigger part of the globe beginning with Latin America, then Asia, and finally Africa. Her development did not arise because of scientific discoveries, but was rather a product of wealth accumulated through outright looting during the mercantile period and through dispossession during the era of colonisation. The same developmental pattern, observes Ndlovu-Gatsheni, cannot be replicated in Africa as this would mean having to colonise and enslave to develop.

Dependency theory also remains powerful if one is to understand the still existing centre-periphery reality in which the centre represents the Euro-North American civilisation and the periphery corresponds to the Global South. The centre-periphery analysis shows that the centre relies on the periphery for its economic development. Ndlovu-Gatsheni poses an interesting question: "How can a continent like Africa, which they say is not developed, continue to finance and support the good living of those in the industrialised North?" For Ndlovu-Gatsheni, this situation "is a misnomer and cannot be explained in any other way except by going back to dependency theory." Dependency theory enables the understanding of the structural processes that produce contradictory effects in the centre and the periphery. These processes facilitate and allow for Africa, rich in resources, to remain poor, at the same time she finances the development of the industrialised North through endless debt payments. Perhaps the greatest strength of dependency theory is that it forms the basis for the theory of coloniality, which, as Ndlovu-Gatsheni demonstrates, offers a powerful mode of analysis to understand Africa's socio-economic, political, ideological and epistemological condition.

Decoloniality as an approach borrows its analysis of the role and complicity of the African elite in the underdevelopment of Africa from dependency theory. Frantz Fanon talks about the comprador bourgeoisie who are presented as conveyor belts of the exploitation of the Third World by the West. Coloniality, while locating Africa's problems in the social, economic, political, ideological and epistemic conditions emanating from imperial relations, also acknowledges the role of internal dynamics. It particularly emphasizes the role of the local elite that reproduces global tendencies of exploiting others, especially the peasants and workers for their own benefit. Ndlovu-Gatsheni draws his argument from the behaviour of the African elites whom he describes as being "anti-colonial but not decolonial" in their mind-sets. Decoloniality thus acknowledges the agency of the local elite in contributing towards Africa's experiences of underdevelopment. This agency, however, is engraved in and defined by imperial structural and institutional relations. The elite cannot come up with alternatives when they take over from the colonial masters and simply reproduce the colonial system in its undemocratic and exploitative format. In some occasions these elites establish much more authoritarian politico-economic structures than those that were created by colonialism.

Ndlovu-Gatsheni makes reference to Samir Amin as one of the fathers of dependency theory who, despite all criticisms of dependency theory, has not abandoned his structuralist analysis of the world order. He is the one person who still insists on the usefulness of the theory. If decolonial thinkers are to be honest, they would acknowledge that they are standing on the shoulders of giants. Ndlovu-Gatsheni counts dependency theorists such as Amin and other thinkers from the Global South including William E. B. Dubois, Cheikh Anta Diop, Kwame Nkrumah, Amilcar Cabral, Theophilus Obenga, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Claude Ake and others, among these giants.

Limitations of Dependency Theory and the Emergence of Alternative Theories

Ndlovu-Gatsheni stresses that a theory is not a dogma. It is neither static, nor an answer to all human problems. Theories are lenses, rather than closed systems. Furthermore, "all theories are incomplete and because of that incompleteness, they are capable of improvement". In the face of criticism, a theory can evolve or expand its premises. Ndlovu-Gatsheni cautions against a fundamentalist position on theories because a lot of theories actually borrow from each other and sometimes overlap. It is also not uncommon for scholars to revisit and re-examine their theoretical persuasions. For example, the Peruvian sociologist Anibal Quijano was a dependency theorist in the 1960s and 70s, but is one of the linchpins of decolonial theory today. Thus his works

have traces of dependency theory and in fact build upon this theoretical framing. Several other scholars of decolonial theory have had similar links with dependency theory. Some of the leading decolonial theorists were previously Marxists. Ndlovu-Gatsheni notes that such theoretical shifts by scholars are not uncommon and are sometimes informed by perceived limitations of previous theories and a changed world situation. The shifts thus reflect introspection and adaptation to changing trends. It is perhaps not surprising that coloniality as an approach takes a cue from several aspects of dependency theory. For example, to gain a deeper understanding of coloniality, there is a need to be historically knowledgeable about modernity, colonialism, imperialism and capitalism. Therefore, we should perceive dependency theory as having expanded its premises, rather than abandoning them, in the face of increasing criticism.

One of the criticisms levelled against dependency theory, for example, is related to economic determinism. Its emphasis on economic structures in explaining Africa's state of affairs can be attributed to the dominant Marxist tradition of the time. Decoloniality has, however, expanded the analysis of the African experience beyond economic determinism just as post-structuralists and postcolonial theorists have done. The works of Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Frantz Fanon and others, for example, demonstrated that colonialism affected African civilisations not only at the economic level, but also at the ontological, cultural, ideological, epistemic and psychological levels. Emerging scholars have thus expanded, rather than abandoned, the analytical frame of dependency theory in such a way that it now includes other aspects of the multi-dimensional nature of oppression and domination. It is within this context that we should appreciate the theory/concept of coloniality, which is much broader as "it covers issues of asymmetrical power relations, as well as coloniality of knowledge taking the form of 'epistemicides' (killing of other people's knowledge), 'linguicides' (killing of other people's languages) and theft of history, as part of re-constituting the current global order."

For Ndlovu-Gatsheni, the power relations are asymmetrical in the sense that at the top there is the USA, NATO and the Pentagon wielding military and political power backed by accumulation of weapons of mass destruction. This alone shows that understanding international power relations cannot be limited to economic aspects in the manner that dependency theory proposed. Hence it is necessary to reconfigure and re-articulate the theory in the form of decoloniality, which introduces such concepts as hierarchies of power. This reconfiguration takes into consideration the issues of power relations and epistemic dependency, among other things. Epistemic dependency refers to the over-reliance of the Global South on Western ideas and knowledge systems and critical social theories. Finally, the concept of coloniality also hinges on the question of being, whereby

being human itself is colonised through social classification of the human species and racial hierarchisation. Thus the Euro-North American ideology not only economically disadvantages Africans but also denies them their being. The concept of coloniality seeks to make a much more holistic analysis of dependent relations that goes beyond economic determinism.

Another criticism that has been levelled against dependency theory is its silence on the gender dimension. This is unlike decoloniality as a theory which, according to Ndlovu-Gatsheni, tries to de-patriarchalise, de-racialise, de-tribalise, decolonise, de-imperialise and democratise. Decoloniality deals with totality and not a single thread of analysis. Ndlovu-Gatsheni maintains that the universalisation of patriarchy, for instance, is partly traceable to Western conceptualisation of the world, particularly its bio-centricism. The same is true of the universalisation of maleness and masculinity. African sociologist and feminist Oyeronke Oyewumi studied societies like the Igbo and Yoruba of Nigeria and found that they were not organised according to gender differentiation prior to colonialism. Seniority was the organising principle. This is why there is a need for de-patriarchalising and also reducing epistemological dependency so that African scholars produce knowledge that reflect African realities instead of using lenses drawn from the industrialised North to understand the Global South.

Ndlovu-Gatsheni is keenly aware of the criticisms levelled against dependency theory, including the charge that it is old scholarship that fails to locate the role played by internal factors towards Africa's underdevelopment. He references his counterparts, particularly in West Africa, who point to the rampant corruption in their region as clear evidence that African problems are engineered by Africans themselves. This position can probably be explained by the fact that many of these countries were never settler colonies and also got their political independence relatively early. Settler colonies were significantly more integrated in the orbit of the metropole and so the core-periphery relationship was much more pronounced during and after independence. The non-settler colonies' earlier independence from colonialism also gives these scholars an erroneous impression that these countries have had time to sever, or at the very least significantly reduce, their ties with former colonisers. Ndlovu-Gatsheni insists that accusing African elites of being corrupt and therefore responsible for Africa's challenges, without examining the global nature and source of corruption, is at best a partial analysis, if not an entirely misguided one. Dependence by its very nature breeds corruption. The global capitalist system is a grand corrupt economic formation. Colonialism was a very corrupt venture. Apartheid was a giant corrupt machine. African leaders emerge within this context. When the African elite came to power after independence, they used the state for their accumulation because colonialism had

dispossessed them and reduced them into simple sources of cheap labour. The colonialist had similarly used the state for primitive accumulation. The corrupt African elite, better termed the parasitic bourgeoisie, has only been made possible by the structural processes created and perpetuated by the colonial system and global world order. It would thus be naïve to treat the corruption in African countries in isolation from global capital and as a purely local phenomenon. The corrupt officials associate themselves with global capital, so their corruption should also be appreciated within the context of global structural relations. Corruption is thus not a cause, but a symptom of a problem that in fact is structural and global. Such an analysis is only possible through the lenses of dependency theory.

On Asia and Africa

Ndlovu-Gatsheni also comments on the Asian presence in Africa, particularly China. He responds to a question on how these relations can be interpreted and if the explanatory framework of dependency theory can help make sense of these emerging developments. Using the Zimbabwean case, Ndlovu-Gatsheni notes that the government's Look East Policy was in search for a better patron/donor. This move is an admission by the government that they are still dependent and cannot stand on their own feet. What has simply happened by going East is to change the character and form of dependency from that of the past to a new one, without shifting the logic. The terms of dependency are certainly different as the Chinese have learnt from how the West operated, specifically how the latter had created resistance in the periphery as result of interference in internal politics. Thus the Chinese have resorted to offering financial aid without interference with internal politics or attaching funding to questions of democracy and human rights that became fashionable after the collapse of the Berlin Wall. The Chinese are not concerned with the nature of rule in African states: it matters little whether or not their governments are democratic. One of the Chinese methods of extending its presence in Africa has been through the Confucius Institutes – which are Chinese centres of language and cultural learning. These have been established in different African countries. Like the old imperialists, the Chinese seek to spread their hegemony not only economically but also through cultural penetration. A closer analysis of this situation suggests that dependency theory remains important as a starting point in understanding the structural dependency on the East. The dependency that Zimbabwe and other African countries have on Chinese loans and financial assistance in general is very telling.

The greatest beggar, remarks Ndlovu-Gatsheni, is the African president who has to travel from one country to the other with a begging bowl. If the African president is not begging in Britain he is begging in China and Japan, “and if your president is too

arrogant to beg you suffer the consequences”. For Ndlovu-Gatsheni, we can thus not throw away dependency theory in a world where de-imperialisation has not been achieved and where political decolonisation has not led to economic emancipation. As long as Africa continues to leap from one patron to another for financial crumbs, the premises of dependency theory remain critical in understanding the structures that define and allow such financial dependency.

Dependency theory, Decoloniality and Solutions to the African Situation

Early thinkers in the 1960s came up with varied solutions to the African scenario. Some suggested speeding up African decolonisation and others pointed to socialism or capitalism as the best ideological paths to adopt. The Bandung Conference of 1955 was important as African and Asian leaders openly rejected the paths of capitalism and socialism and chose to continue with the decolonization project. The decolonization they were forging had to result in a New International Economic Order (NIEO). To escape ‘Cold War coloniality’ the leaders of most of the countries of the Global South embraced the principles of ‘non-alignment’ which was concretely put down through the formation of the Non-aligned Movement (NAM). Economic emancipation topped the agendas of the 1960s and 1970s. However, it is important that we acknowledge the structural limitation imposed by a particular world order from the outset if sustainable solutions are to be achieved. The post-1945 world order remained hierarchical. Moreover, Africa occupied the lowest position as supplier of raw materials and consumer of finished products. Unless there is a de-structuring and subsequent re-orientation of this global structure, it would be difficult for Africa to develop.

At the political level, there is a need to achieve what Ndlovu-Gatsheni terms de-imperialisation, a position where no one country dictates to another what to do or not to do. Countries like the USA still dictate how other countries should be governed. Such a situation is not healthy but simply entrenches global coloniality. Epistemologically, we cannot succeed in breaking away from knowledge dependency on the West if we do not come up with new epistemologies whose centres are in Africa. Ndlovu-Gatsheni believes that we have an opportune moment now for Africa to produce knowledge. He perceives that an epistemological break in the West has been induced by crisis after crisis, which has seen the waning of confidence in the current theoretical frameworks. The world is still Euro-North American centric despite the rise of the Asian tigers, and this status quo must change.

Ndlovu-Gatsheni also comments on the concept of delinking as a solution proposed by some dependency theorists, particularly Samir Amin. For him, the concept of delinking must not be taken literally. Delinking must be interpreted as a proposal to emphasise

the development and expansion of internal economic capacities, as opposed to emphasising economic ties with the West. Expansion and emphasis on internal capacities would enable Africa to engage on equal footing with the rest of the world. The process of internal capacitation should include allowing economies within Africa to connect to the African people and not necessarily the outside world. This is the context within which delinking must be appreciated.

For Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni, the solutions to the plight of the Global South lie in its ability to succeed in de-imperialising and decolonising the modern world system and its shifting world orders. Epistemologically, there is a need for scholarship from the Global South to shift geographically from dependence on the Global North and rise from the asymmetrical division of intellectual labour in which those in the Global South are reduced to 'hunter-gathering mode' of raw data and the West arrogates itself the power of processing this data into theories that are then consumed in Africa. Home-grown critical thinking is urgently needed if the Global South is to begin contributing meaningfully to the challenges it faces. Ndlovu-Gatsheni bemoans what he calls an epistemological drought found in the African nations particularly in institutions of higher learning, which should be churning out knowledge on and about the region. A consumer culture has also hit Africa, and people think more about the stomach and less about the mind.

Conclusion

A number of talking points emerge in the discussion with Ndlovu-Gatsheni. He demonstrates the explanatory power of dependency theory and how it continues to be relevant especially as a point of departure for theory on coloniality/decoloniality. For Ndlovu-Gatsheni, dependency theory has not withered but simply expanded its lenses of analysis beyond a Marxist framing that entrenched economic determinism. Ndlovu-Gatsheni maintains that, to a certain extent, the Asian presence in Africa can be explained by dependency theory, given Africa's dependence on Chinese financial assistance and the nature of Chinese presence in the continent. Ndlovu-Gatsheni admits that dependency theory is not watertight. It is silent on variables such as gender for instance. The emergence of decoloniality brought in an alternative way of understanding and contextualising Africa's experience. To use Ngugi wa Thiong'o's terminology, decoloniality takes into account the fact that twentieth century anti-colonial struggles only expelled the physical empire, but not the metaphysical empire.