Was (Is) Dependency Theory Worthless? Not at All

Gabriel Almond scathingly criticizes Dependency theory in his 1987 article, “The Development of Political Development.” Almond claims that “dependistas tell us only part of the story” of development and that the theory overstates the hegemony of capitalism. Further, he challenges the objectivity of Dependency and characterizes the theory as a “propaganda fragment of an ideology” asserting that dependency is a research agenda which has been unproductive. Apart from these claims, Almond does make some constructive criticisms of Dependency; overall, however, he is unduly harsh.

Dependency theory does have its merits: in the early 1960’s Dependency challenged the dominant Western view of development, Modernization, and examined how poorer (periphery) countries’ relationships with richer (core) countries conditioned and inhibited the development of the “underdeveloped” countries. Dependency also looks at the historical perspective and shows how colonialism created core-periphery relationships in which the core held a monopoly over the periphery.

Helping to shape the intellectual and practical debate over the development of “Third World” or non-industrialized nations is an important contribution of Dependency. The theory began to concretize in the early 1960’s when Modernization theory dominated discussion of international development. Dependency takes into account factors (such as colonialism) that Modernization largely overlooks thereby enhancing the dialectic. Though Almond sees little of merit in Dependency, the theory is plausible enough to have forced him to consider it. Likewise, Samuel Huntington gives some consideration
to colonialism in his 1968 book *Political Order in Changing Societies* which seeks, among other objectives, to explain why Modernization did not fulfill the great expectations that its early advocates had entertained. Generating reasonable polemic in intellectual debate is never fruitless.

This is not to say that Dependency does not have other merits beyond simply having instigated debate, it does. The *dependistas’* focus on relations and factors external to the developing country is one of its major contributions to the debate on development. Advocates of modernization theory envision the process of development as primarily driven by the internal forces of social mobilization which lead to the empowerment of the formerly politically disenfranchised. Modernization may be fueled by technology from outside, but it still remains a predominantly internal process that would not require the overt participation of industrialized countries. Huntington also focuses on the internal situation of a given country asserting that a lack of political development is the main barrier to economic development and industrialization. Modernization does not allow for the possibility that the underdevelopment of the “Third World” is due to the “Third World’s” relationship with the “First World.”

Paul Baran, with his 1952 article “On the Political Economy of Backwardness,” was perhaps one of the first to see that the periphery’s relationship with the core was what perpetuated its “backwardness.” Baran argues that the introduction of capitalism in the periphery broke down traditional relationships, led to social polarization, and created a situation in which the local elite could not and would not develop their nation. As a result, nations on the periphery rely upon the core for foreign investment to develop themselves. This situation is problematic because foreign interests do not necessarily
coincide with local interests. Peter Evans more thoroughly examines the effects of colonialism and capitalism on the “Third World” in his 1979 book. Simply put, Evans argues that monopolistic relationships which benefited the core were set up during the colonial period and, though somewhat changed since independence, these relationships continue to favor core interests over those of the periphery. The core was never interested in diversifying and developing the periphery because to do so would challenge its economic supremacy over the periphery. Dependency on the core arrests the development of the periphery. Modernization theory took little notice of the effects of colonialism and the core’s monopolistic position in relation to the periphery. Dependency looks at these external relationships and their effect on development thereby offering a more holistic view of the periphery’s economic system.

Underlying Modernization theory and the thinking of many Western scholars is the assumption that core-periphery interaction is beneficial to the periphery (as well as the core). In his article, “The Development of Underdevelopment,” Andre Gunder Frank challenges this notion,

a largely erroneous view is that the development of these underdeveloped countries and, within them their most underdeveloped domestic areas, must and will be generated or stimulated by diffusing capital, institutions, values, etc., to them from the international and national capitalist metropoles.

Further, Gunder Frank hypothesizes that periphery countries experience their greatest development when contact with the core is severed as occurred during the World Wars and the Depression. According to Gunder Frank, a first glance at the data begins to verify his hypothesis. The one-sided view that core-periphery interaction is always beneficial is just too optimistic and obtuse. Providing an alternative to this view is another strength of Dependency.
Not only does Dependency question the assumption that interacting with the core will benefit the periphery, it explains why this will not always be the case. The *dependistas* point out that the majority of core-periphery relationships were established during the colonial period. Under colonial rule the core used its political domination of the periphery in order to create economic domination, exploiting the periphery to the core’s gain. How can the continuation of relationships with this history prove beneficial to the periphery? Evans discusses the “complete guarantee” of colonialism which effectively eliminated competition from the local elite and other core nations because of a given country’s political domination of a periphery country. Evans acknowledges that exploitative colonial relationship begins to change with independence, but a dependent country is still disadvantaged and must constantly finds ways to better its bargaining position. The “Triple Alliance” of multinationals, state, and local bourgeoisie will not readily forfeit their privileged position. Dependency’s consideration of the colonial past add validity to its assertion that core-periphery interaction is not always good for the periphery.

As to finding a solution the periphery’s problems of underdevelopment, or *undevelopment*, the *dependistas* maintain that simply following the path that industrialized nations took to development is not the answer. In response to the view of many Western scholars that “Third World” nations are in an earlier stage of development that industrialized nations themselves went through, Gunder Frank argues that this is simply not the case, “underdevelopment is not original or traditional…. The now developed countries were never *under*developed, though they may have been *undeveloped.” Gunder Frank goes on to state that this problem will not be resolved by
exporting “sterile stereotypes from the metropolis.” He effectively points out that there is no “one” proper path to development that all nations should follow. Baran also notes that periphery countries can not necessarily look to the *metropoles* for guidance in their attempts to become developed. “Foreign experts” will dispense policy advice that they find attractive, but that may not be “necessarily conducive to economic development of the ‘benefitted’ countries.” Like other *dependistas*, Gunder Frank and Baran realize that the *metropoles* have their own interests at heart when attempting to develop the periphery. The “benign” interest of the *metropoles* is actually somewhat malicious and unlikely to abet development in the poorer nations. As a result, *dependistas* urged the periphery to seek its own path to development, driven by their own scholars and policy makers.

Dependency’s exposure of the ethnocentrism of Modernization and other theories on development is one of its most important achievements. Too many Western scholars assumed that the “backwardness” of the periphery was the cause of its “underdevelopment.” As discussed above, these scholars advocated Western institutions and reforms in order to develop poorer nations. This faith in the “West’s way” is just too narrow-minded. Dependency advocates finding an alternative that is not so “Western” and that might be better suited to the periphery’s historical experience and present day situation.

In his criticism of Dependency theory, Almond accuses it of having a Marxist and Socialist agenda. He claims that this agenda clouded the thinking and views of the *dependistas*, preventing them from seeing development objectively. Almonds harsh criticism was written in 1987. Interestingly, Gunder Frank’s autobiographical essay of
1997 notes that most academic research performed by American scholars during the Cold War was funded by the U.S. Government which sought to justify its own policy towards the “Third World.” Due to this situation, Gunder Frank argues that much of this research was pro-Western and vindicated U.S. foreign policy. In Gunder Frank’s eyes, the objectivity that Almond claims to have is a myth; Almond may be correct in stating that Dependency had a Socialist slant, but he fails to acknowledge that he is also influenced by ideology. Regardless of its bias, Dependency theory considers external factors that Modernization does not and describes how colonialism and monopolies favoring the metropoles have prevented the “underdeveloped” world from developing; this is Dependency’s greatest merit.