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Book Review of *Teoria de la Dependencia: Una Anticritica* (1978) by Vania Bambirra

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Book Review:

Teoria de la Dependencia: Una Anticritica (1978)

by Vania Bambirra.

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Introduction

In her 1978 short book *Teoría de la Dependencia: Una Anticritica* Brazilian scholar Vania Bambirra² responds to the most prominent critiques during the middle of the '70s about Dependency Theory. In line with a fertile trend in Marxist critical literature, she attempts to turn critiques on its head, resulting in an anti-critique. Intending to systematically reply to the critics, the author unravels some of Dependency Theory's basic tenets. The book is divided into three main parts. In the introductory first section, Bambirra contextualized Dependency Theory from a historical and theoretical point of view. In the second, and most important, section the author methodically reviewed the critiques of three prominent authors (Agustín Cueva, Octavio Rodríguez, and Enrique Semo) that had questioned Dependency Theory. In the third section, she provided some brief conclusions and expressed her validation of Dependency Theory as a tool to understand Latin America, and thus

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² Vania Bambirra was a Brazilian sociologist. She graduated in sociology from the *Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais*, she obtained her Master's at the *Universidade de Brasília* and her PhD at the *Universidad nacional Autónoma de México*. Together with Ruy Mauro Marini and Theotonio dos Santos she has been one of the most prominent scholars of Marxist Dependency Theory. Her most famous contribution is the book *El capitalismo dependiente latinoamericano* (1972), where she explores the historical development of dependent capitalism across Latin America.

change its political reality in a socialist sense. This book is extremely valuable insofar as it contributes to the understanding of what Dependency Theory is and what it is not through juxtaposition with rival theoretical inclinations.

Dependency Theory's Historical Context

Although it was elaborated in Latin America, Dependency Theory draws upon Marx and Engel's works on colonialism, Lenin's theory of imperialism, Luxemburg's works and the theses on the colonial revolution of the II Congress of the COMINTERN. This theoretical underpinning unveils what Bambirra calls the inherent "critical preoccupation" (p.15) of Dependency Theory.

However, the immediate elements that fostered Dependency Theory and its diffusion, must be found in the failure of the two main theoretical positions that had attempted to explain Latin America's underdevelopment: orthodox Marxism and ECLAC's structuralism. In fact, they were unable analytically and politically to address the stagnation that Latin America suffered in the '60s, which slowly led to the triumph of military dictatorships in most of the countries of the subcontinent. "The crisis unveils the new character of dependency" ³(p.18), and the old conceptions were not fit to address it.

Orthodox Marxism claimed to represent the working classes' interests and was politically represented by Latin American Communist Parties. It maintained that Latin America was in a pre-capitalist stage, and thus a strategic alliance between the exploited classes and the progressive national bourgeoisie had to be fostered to promote anti-imperialist, anti-oligarchic democratic governments. ECLAC's structuralism instead represented the interests of the Latin American industrial national bourgeoisie and upheld the "ideology of development" (p.17), according to which development was inherently good, and had to be achieved by politically removing the obstacles that relegated the region to a subordinate role. Both conceptions crumbled under the historical experience of the '60s in Latin America that demonstrated that there is no such thing as a national bourgeoisie⁴.

³ By "new character of dependency" Bambirra refers to what Marini (1973) conceptualized as the "next ring in the chain of dependency"; the fact that dependency in Latin America had not ceased with industrialization, but rather had become even stronger due to the penetration of foreign capital in manufacturing and later in the financial markets.

⁴ Or rather, that the bourgeoisie does not have an inherent attachment to national development, but only to the circumstance in which the rate of profit is granted, be that *via* national development or in association with foreign capital.

Since Dependency theory “provides a theoretical framework indispensable to those committed not only to the comprehension but to the transformation of reality” (p.26) it acquires the status of *theory*. Not as a general theory of capitalism, nor as a theory of the dependent capitalist mode of production, but at a lower level of abstraction, as the “study of the concrete socio-economic formation of dependent capitalism” (p.26).

What is Dependency Theory? Critique(s) and *Anticritique*

Before delving into the thorough analysis of the critiques Bambirra shows two common mistakes that most critics make. In the first place, she recovers the heterogeneity of Dependency Theory scholars. Dependency Theory ⁵is often criticized as a monolithic approach, but within it several different tendencies can be found. Some basic assumptions -common to most Dependency Theory Scholars- do exist; the impossibility of autonomous national development for dependent countries and the concept of dependency itself. However, critics fail to address those basic tenets and prefer to perform a more superficial critique.

The second element that is common to most of the critiques is the poor bibliography they refer to. She maintains that Dependency Theory scholars are often criticized only based on a few of their works, and likewise, the body of thought is attacked only based on a few “main” authors (defined as the “main” univocally by the critics themselves). According to Bambirra, these two main flaws limit the capacity of attempted critiques directed towards the central nucleus of Dependency Theory, which instead are “subjective, ideological, and destructive” (p.28).

Augustine Cueva’s⁶ Critique

⁵ The term itself is criticized by Bambirra (p.36). By quoting Enzo Faletto, she claims that most critiques are directed towards an abstract entity, the *dependentistas* (i.e. scholars who adopt the Dependency Theory paradigm), created by North American academia. There is no such thing as a homogenous group of *dependentistas* insofar as Dependency Theory encompasses a variety of approaches.

⁶ Agustín Cueva was one of the most prominent Ecuadorian scholars. He studied at the Pontificia Universidad de Ecuador, from which he was expelled for participating in student protests. Later, he obtained a scholarship to study in Paris at the *Ecole d’Hautes Etudes in Paris*. He founded the *Escuela de Sociología de la Universidad Central de Ecuador* in 1967. His production is characterized by Marxist analysis, which validity he defends throughout most of his intellectual activity. His most prominent work is *El desarrollo del capitalismo en América Latina* (1977). He is also known for his polemic against Dependency Theory. He responded to Bambirra’s *anti-critique* with the essay *¿Vigencia de la anticritica o necesidad de autocritica?* (1979).

After considering some formal aspects, Bambirra addresses Cueva's criticisms of three main analytical aspects of Dependency Theory. The first one has to do with Theotonio Dos Santos' conception of imperialism; more precisely his claim of the need to "expand and reformulate" it (p.46). Dos Santos argues that authors such as Lenin, Luxemburg, and Bukharin focused on imperialism from the point of view of the imperialist countries and did not study its implications in the dependent ones. Cueva sees in Dos Santos's argument the rejection of Lenin's theory of imperialism and of the role of capitalist expansion in promoting the development of productive forces in Latin America. Bambirra stresses that although investment from imperial countries did cause the modernization of the Latin American productive structure, foreign capital would act in alliance with the social forces that maintained Latin America in an underdeveloped position (in Lenin's time, the export oligarchy). In other words, the condition of capitalist development in Latin America was the perpetuation of its underdevelopment. Although Cueva maintains that Dos Santos argued against Lenin, Bambirra demonstrates that in Lenin's work after 1920 – and its revolutionary praxis- can be found the conceptual nucleus of Dependency Theory and Dos Santos' "revisitation" of imperialism.

Another aspect of Cueva's criticism of Dependency Theory is the treatment of the national question and its dialectical relation with class struggle. Cueva affirms that Dependency Theory is methodologically nationalist, insofar as it converts "countries and regions in the object of the analysis" (p.53). Bambirra responds to this by highlighting that Marxists should consider the dialectical unity of struggles against imperialism and against the bourgeoisie; class struggle unfolds in specific national contexts, and its national dimension should be considered in relation to the general evolution of class confrontation on the global scale. Class struggles are not isolated from the dynamics of the struggle between imperialist and oppressed countries, and Dependency Theory points in that direction.

Cueva deepens its criticism of the nationalist character of Dependency Theory by stressing its treatment of the national bourgeoisie. He criticizes Gunder Frank's work on Paraguay and deems it "nostalgic of a lost national capitalism" (p.60) and then highlights the contradiction between that and the negation, by Dependency Theory scholars, of the mere existence of a national bourgeoisie. Bambirra responds to that by highlighting that the negation of a national bourgeoisie does not mean that a bourgeoisie does not exist as a class in Latin America, but rather that it is subjugated to the interests of the imperialist bourgeoisie, and hence relinquishes the idea of "autonomous national development" (p.65). Along this line, Cueva criticizes Marini's (1973) work for conflating general elements that characterize capitalism and those

specific to dependent capitalism, especially regarding the concept of *superexploitation*⁷. He argues that superexploitation is not an exclusive feature of dependent capitalism but of capitalism in general. Bambirra conclusively argues that, although it is true that superexploitation is present in imperialist countries, the specificity of dependent capitalism lies in the fact that superexploitation is “permanent and systematic” (p.75), making this a specific feature of dependent capitalism. Thus, it is true that superexploitation is not an exclusive characteristic of dependent countries, whereas its systematic and permanent presence is.

Octavio Rodríguez’s⁸ Critique

Bambirra now focuses on Octavio Rodríguez’s critique rooted in the ECLAC’s stream of thought. In the first place, according to the author, Rodríguez uses the term “dependency” in a non-rigorous way. He affirms that “dependency is a common feature they (the ECLAC and Dependency Theory) use as a fundamental analytical concept [...] to explain stagnation in the second half of the XX century in Latin America” (p.75). According to Bambirra, this statement conflates the different understandings of ECLAC and Dependency Theory. In fact, Dependency Theory scholars argue that dependency is not only the cause of stagnation but also of the peculiar forms that economic growth takes in Latin America, such as developmentalism or import substitution industrialization. Rodríguez’s interpretation wrongfully suggests that dependency is only applied to the post-1950 situation, whereas in reality, Dependency Theory scholars use that concept to analyse the insertion of Latin America in global capitalism from its outset.

Another issue with Rodríguez’s critique is that he deems Dependency Theory to understand dependency as an external element, and thus considering “[...] underdevelopment as mainly conditioned by external factors” (p.80). This results in Rodríguez’s conceptualization of industrialization as a means to break the cage of dependency. Bambirra says this is “unacceptable” (p.80) since, although some works

⁷ Superexploitation is a key concept of Dependency Theory laid out by Marini in *Dialéctica de la Dependencia* (1973). Essentially, the bourgeoisie in dependent countries constantly cedes value (through different mechanisms) towards the imperialist bourgeoisie. Thus, to compensate for that loss, and maintain an acceptable rate of profit, the dependent bourgeoisie engages in the *superexploitation* of labour, which is the retribution of labour below its value (the value needed to reproduce the labour force).

⁸ Octavio Rodríguez was a prominent Uruguayan intellectual. He graduated from the *Pontificia Universidade Católica do Rio de Janeiro* and then obtained a Master from the *Universidad de Chile* in Santiago. He worked at the *Instituto Latinoamericano y del Caribe de Planificación Económica y Social* an ECLAC agency. He was close to the ECLAC’s positions and collaborated with the institution. He wrote *La Teoría del Subdesarrollo de la CEPAL* (1980) which is considered his most prominent work.

might point in that direction, it is by using the Marxist method that Dependency Theory scholars overcome the cage of external determinism. Bambirra demonstrates that industrialization is conceived by Dependency Theory as a “redefinition at the internal level of the relations of dependency” (p.81). The author convincingly argues that the ECLAC only studies the manifestations of dependency, while Dependency Theory defines it rigorously (and this is the definition Rodriguez seems to miss) as “[...] a conditioning element which is redefined in relation with the structural possibilities of national economies” (p.86).

Rodriguez argues in favour of ECLAC’s conception: the external constrictions are due to internal obstacles in “traditional societies” (p.86), whereas Bambirra maintains that the patterns of development of dependent countries are bound to the dynamics of imperialist countries. Internal and external factors are dialectically linked. Rodriguez maintains that underdevelopment is the reason for dependency whereas Bambirra that: “[...] dependency is the cause of underdevelopment” (p.88).

Enrique Semo’s⁹ Critique

The last critic that Bambirra repudiates is Enrique Semo, who argues for the substitution of the concept of dependency for interdependency. According to Semo, Dependency Theory scholars neglect the importance of political independence and thus argue that economic development is impossible under a condition of dependency. Nevertheless, Bambirra once again unveils that this critique is built on a rather weak basis and is fundamentally rooted in a miscomprehension of dependency. Dependency Theory scholars have demonstrated that although economic growth is possible in underdeveloped countries, it reinforces the relations of dependency, and in any case, it cannot be strong enough to overcome the contradictions inherent to the dependent socioeconomic formation.

Semo -based on the improvement of the OPEC countries’ position vis a vis the imperialist countries in the aftermaths of the oil crisis in the early ‘70s- argues that third-world countries will have a “[...] more important role among the capitalist countries” (p.94). This demonstrates, according to him, that even though dependency and unequal exchange exist, they are not fatal and can be reverted from within. This leads Semo to the conclusion that the transition from underdevelopment to development is possible without touching the core capitalist organization of

⁹ Enrique Semo is a Mexican economic historian. He studied Economics and Law at the University of Tel Aviv and History at the *Universidad Autónoma de México*. He earned his PhD at the Humboldt University in Economic History in Berlin. He has studied the history of Mexico, especially from the early stages of capitalism. His most famous book is *Historia del capitalismo en México* (1973).

production and society. Bambirra criticises this view based on multiple arguments. The improvement of the OPEC countries' position is bound to the abundance of oil, which is a rather irreplicable element for other third-world countries, since oil - due to its scarcity and importance- can be leveraged way more easily than other raw materials. Furthermore, new investment implied by the growth of those countries' economies is controlled by multinational corporations, thus reinforcing dependency from an external cycle of capitalist accumulation. In addition to that, economic growth in those countries will still maintain its dependent character at the internal level, following the dependent pattern of development led by a "national" bourgeoisie committed to the interests of the imperialist bourgeoisie. As Bambirra argues "interdependency can only happen between free nations, in which the national bourgeoisie controls its markets and technologies" (p.97), which is not the case in the OPEC countries, believing the contrary is a "petty bourgeoisie dream" (p.100)

This mystification of the reality of third-world countries leads according to Bambirra to dangerous political implications fostering class collaboration between the proletariat and the national bourgeoisie for the sake of independent national capitalist development. This strategy was the same followed by traditional communist parties in Latin America -although based on different assumptions than Semos's- and is strongly criticized by Dependency Theory scholars. Moreover, it leads to the idea that -since dependency is a secondary element- it is possible to struggle separately against imperialism and in favour of socialism, whereas as we have seen they are inseparable according to Dependency Theory.

Is an *Antricitique* Necessary Today?

In *Teoría de la Dependencia: Una Anticritica* Bambirra provides a cutting-edge defence of Dependency Theory at a time when Latin America was undergoing the offensive of authoritarianism as a response to the vigorous revolutionary movements that had shaken the subcontinent during the '60s and early '70s. The author systematically points out how the "analytical deformations" (p.103) upheld by other schools of thought result in wrongful conceptions of what the struggle of the working classes should entail, leading to disastrous consequences on the political level. Following Bambirra's affiliation to historical materialism the following question must be asked: Does the current situation of the Latin American socioeconomic formation still require an anti-critique? A few elements for further reflection can be outlined.

The high rates of growth achieved by some peripheral countries (e.g. the BRICS countries group) have brought to the fore once again the developmentalist school, and the "ideology of development" (p.17). In Latin America, the governments of the so-called pink tide applied the developmentalist recipe of fostering the growth of the national bourgeoisie, combined with redistributive social policies, achieved

considerable growth and the improvement of several social indexes. These events questioned on the political level the main assumption of Dependency Theory and caused large segments of the radical left to converge towards the progressive projects of the pink tide's governments.

However, the neo-developmentalists¹⁰ project showed its limitations, which led to the recrudescence of authoritarian governments in the region¹¹ and the revival of Dependency Theory. Different scholars have turned to dependency to explain the trajectory of developmentalist governments in Latin America. Carcanholo (2017) analyses the determinants and manifestations of dependency in the 21st century. Miranda & Carcanholo (2021) study the dependent character of neoliberal capitalism in Brazil, with a focus on the limitations that the dependent conditions entail for projects of national development. Others such as Valencia (2021) and Luce (2007; 2015) rescue Marini's (1969) concept of subimperialism to explain the trajectories of those dependent countries that attained a prominent position in the world economic and political order, and yet still struggle with their dependent condition.

The conditions for a proactive defence of Dependency Theory are still valid insofar as despite conjunctural changes, the material conditions of Latin American economies and society have not changed at the core. This is why this book is so important: it provides us with valuable insights into what Dependency Theory is and what its main conceptual and political enemies are. Now the task is to unravel and explore its continuous transformations in contemporary socioeconomic formations.

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¹⁰ This how the governments of the pink tide are often called to differentiate them from the classical developmentalist ones.

¹¹ The clearest examples being Bolsonaro in Brazil and Milei in Argentina

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