Dependency Theory as a Marxist Tool for Understanding the Development Crisis in the Third World

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Abstract

It has been argued by some scholars like Reece (1983) among others that the Dependency Theory as a tool for analysis has outlived its usefulness, given the fact that some of its major postulations are fast becoming anachronistic. Against this backdrop therefore, this paper, relying substantially on data generated from secondary sources as its methodology, argues otherwise. The paper examines the relevance of the Dependency Theory as a Marxist tool for explaining and understanding the development crisis in the Third World. This paper argues that the Dependency Theory is still very much relevant in explaining and understanding the development crisis in the Third World, especially given its flavour of Marxism. The paper found out that the historical factors adduced for the development crisis in the Third World more than anything else explains why those countries have remained underdeveloped. Internal factors are only secondary causes, not primary causative factors. In the end, the paper recommends among others that with less reliance on foreign ideas and finance capital, and less reliance on externally motivated public policies and programmes, the vicious circle of underdevelopment in the Third World would be broken, and it would begin to test positive to development.

Keywords: Development Crisis, Dependency Theory, Third World, Marxism

Introduction

Dependency Theory refers to a group of theories that propose that some countries and societies are poor, not because of their traditional culture, attitudes, and values but because they are dominated and grossly exploited by the rich and powerful countries (Paul, 2017, P.31). It is a theory of international capitalist economy that places so much emphasis on unequal economic relations among nations of the world system. The theory attempts to explain the related conditions of economic development and the lack of, and evident need for it, in the countries of the periphery, or the Third World (Reece, 1983). The root of the Dependency Theory is traceable to Marxism. This is because the theory has been significantly influenced by the Marxist theory of Imperialism and was developed to challenge Modernization Theory (Bornschier, 1992). In other words, the theory was developed to challenge by rejecting the central assumption of Modernization Theory, which emphasizes that industrialization,
the introduction to mass media, and the diffusion of Western ideas would transform traditional economies and societies.

The Dependency Theory prevailed in the 1960's, and came to reject the ideas of the Modernists, arguing that underdeveloped countries are not merely primitive versions of developed countries, but have unique features and structures of their own and importantly, are in the situation of being the weaker members in a world market economy, whereas the developed nations were never in an analogous position; they never had to exist in relation to a block of more powerful and economically advanced countries than themselves (Bornschier, 1992 cited in Paul, 2017). It is a body of social science theories predicated on the notion that resources flow from a “periphery” of the poor and underdeveloped states to a “core” of the wealthy states, enriching the latter at the expense of the former. According to Amin (1972), one of the apologists of the Dependency Theory, the poor states are impoverished and the rich states are enriched by the way poor states are integrated into the world capitalist system.

According to Reece (1983), the Dependency Theory seems to have lost its relevance as a result of persistent and continuous critique. These criticisms derive from the fact that the theory has been unable to answer certain important questions, a number of which the Dependency Theory helped to raise itself. The exposition of these weaknesses notwithstanding, the Dependency Theory is still very relevant in explaining and understanding the development crisis in the Third World. Thus, even though the Dependency Theory was mostly popular in the 1960’s and 1970s, its Marxist background and orientation makes it very relevant in explaining and understanding the issue of development or lack of it in the Third World.

The overall objective of this paper is to examine the relevance of the dependency Theory as a Marxist tool for explaining and understanding the development crisis in the Third World. The remaining aspect of this paper is divided into four subsections. Section one is conceptual discourse, which borders on an examination of key concepts of the paper such as the concepts of Development, Underdevelopment, the Third World, Dependency, and Development Crisis. Section two focuses on a historical excursion into the origin and evolution of the Dependency Theory. In section three, which is the crux of the matter, the paper establishes that Dependency Theory is a variant of the Marxist tool for understanding the development crisis in the Third World. Section four centres on conclusions drawn and policy recommendations suggested as a way out of the persistent and continuous development crisis in the Third World.

Conceptual Discourse

Development

The meaning of development has defied consensus among scholars as each prefers to conceive it from their respective ideological and ethnocentric persuasions. In fact, development as a concept has assumed vastly different meanings to many scholars and political commentators whose appreciation and application of the term, reflect and manifest their distinct and diversifying methodological, epistemological, and material foundations and twists. Because of its seemingly nebulous, illusive, and diffusive character therefore, the concept of development
has continued to attract intellectual discourses among the intelligentsia and practitioners. Despite the perspicacity, and efflorescence of writings on the subject, it appears that the concept has remained too elastic for comprehension. Thus, the application of the term development engineering in peripheral capitalist social formations, at best regenerate vicious cycle of underdevelopment and unleash general decay in the living conditions of the masses (Okolie and Nwobashi, 2017).

In the early post Second World War period, development was primarily linked to economic growth with little or no reference to historical causes and the real nature of underdevelopment. This was the central argument of the Modernization school of thought. However, the emergence and growth of the Dependency school of thought in the 1960s and 1970s led to a historical explanation as to why developing nations are backward in relation to the core nations.

From the perspective of economic parameters, Meier and Rauch (2005, p.1) conceives development as the process whereby the real per capita income of a country increases over a long period of time subject to the stipulations that the number of people below an “absolute poverty line” does not increase and that the distribution of income does not become more unequal. In the same vein, Todaro (1992) perceives development as a multidimensional process involving the re-organization and re-orientation of entire economic and social system. He maintained that development must represent the entire gamut of changes by which an entire social system, tuned to the diverse needs of the people and social groups within that system, moves away from a condition of life widely perceived as unsatisfactory and towards a condition of life regarded as materialistically and spiritually better.

The above definition is limited in that the role played by the human factors in the process through which development is achieved and sustained, is not clearly stated. To cover this lacuna, Seers (1969, p.3) argues as follows:

The questions to ask about a country’s development are three: what has been happening to poverty? What has been happening to unemployment? What has been happening to inequality? If all these have declined from high levels then, beyond doubts this has been a period of development for the country concerned. If one or two of these central problems have been growing worse, especially if all three have, it would be strange to call the result development, even if per capita income doubled

Seers (1969) positions further projected by Guolet (1971) and Thirlwall (1989) who argued that development occurs when there are improvements in life sustenance, self-esteem, and freedom from servitude, and when material advancement has expanded the range of choices for individuals. According to Ake (1981); Nnoli (1981); and Rodney (1972), development is multifaceted and human being-centred. To Nnoli (1981), development is first and foremost a phenomenon associated with changes in man’s humanity and creative energies, not in the capacity of the individual and society to control and manipulate the other individuals and societies for their own benefits, but that of humanity at
large. In its simplest term, development is a process of actualizing man’s inherent capacity to do things, greater freedom, responsibility, and material wellbeing.

For us in this paper, development has to do with qualitative and quantitative improvement in virtually all aspects of human endeavours, which comprises the political, economic, social, cultural, mental, psychological and environmental and so on. The focus of development should be on equitable distribution of wealth and income, full utilization of manpower, human capital development, better utilization of natural resources, and protection of human environment among others. The focus of development should be on equitable distribution of wealth and income, full utilization of manpower, human capital development, better utilization of natural resources, and protection of human environment among others. It is a process of creating and guaranteeing conditions, in which people can enjoy, exercise and utilise human rights – economic, social, civil, cultural and political. Development therefore denotes positive change or advancement. In other words, it involves a continuous process of positive change in the quality of life of an individual or a society, reduction of poverty, diseases, unemployment, inequality and mortality.

**Under Development**

Like the concept of development, underdevelopment is a term that is not susceptible to a single universally acceptable definition. There are many definitions as there are development scholars so much so that the reader finds it extremely difficult to pin down a single definition as winning popular acclamation. The concept of underdevelopment has been so politicized by several development scholars, in attempts to provide empirical indices, become guilty of concept over-stretching and quite often thrive on barefoot empiricism and outlandish intellectual circumvention (Okoli, 2017).

While some scholars such as Rostow (1960) and Rogers (1969) with Modernist orientation, view underdevelopment as the inability of a society to tap its resources to better the lots of its people; scholars such as Cardoso (1977), Amin (1973), and Frank (1969) among others with dependency orientation are of the opinion that “the inability to tap these resources” is as a result of contact and premature integrations into the cobweb of international capitalist network. According to Marshal (1998), underdevelopment is a term that is associated dependency theory; and it is used to describe the condition of poverty and economic stagnation characteristic of many Third World societies. What this imply is that these societies are not simply suffering from lack of development, but also that they have not achieved the expected levels of development which would have occurred, had they not been exploited by the advanced capitalist societies.

However, there are a few countries which were hitherto under colonial domination and exploitation such as Singapore, India, South Korea, Brazil, Indonesia, Taiwan and Malaysia among others who were able to break the jinx of underdevelopment through deliberate government fiscal and physical policies. In his contribution, Rodney (1972) opines that underdevelopment is not necessarily the absence of development. This is because every society has the capacity to develop in one way or the other, and to a greater or lesser extent. He maintains that underdevelopment makes sense only as a means of comparing the levels of development between and among countries of the world. Rodney (1972, p.35) remarks that “underdevelopment is a paradox”, noting that “underdevelop-
ment expresses a particular relationship of exploitation: namely, the exploitation of one country by another” (Rodney, 1972, p.24). In his analysis of the paradox of underdevelopment, Rodney raised some vital questions as to why many parts of the world that are naturally rich are actually poor, and parts of the world that are not so well off in wealth of soil and sub-soil are enjoying the highest standards of living.

In tandem with Rodney, Alanana (2006) posits that underdevelopment is neither opposite nor absence of development. Thus, he submits that underdevelopment is a process in which a country has not sufficiently developed. This status of “insufficient development” was acquired under certain historical circumstances. These historical conditions include: centuries of slavery, imperialism, colonialism and neo-colonialism.

In his various synoptic analyses of underdevelopment, Okoli (2017, P.45) draws the following conclusions:

i. Underdevelopment, like development is a process

ii. Underdevelopment is fundamentally externally driven retrogression arising from monumental depletion and expropriation of natural resources of undeveloped economies.

iii. Underdevelopment is quite distinct from undevelopment; the latter is orchestrated by what can be described as inability or failure to make effective and judicious use of available resources by the lack of appropriate skills, training and enlightenment vis-à-vis the existing natural resources potentials. Therefore, the available natural resources are left largely in their pure and unadulterated forms, untapped.

iv. Underdevelopment is largely externally generated and sustained. It is a by-product of organic composition of capital arising from the growth expansion and internal contradictions of Western Capitalism/imperialism.

v. Underdevelopment results from adverse historic conditions, especially colonialism, enslavement, and entrapment which keep developing economies aside from the rapidly growing global economy.

The Third World

At the end of the Second World War, the world was balkanised into two large geopolitical blocs and spheres of influence with conflicting ideologies: capitalism versus socialism. The Western capitalist bloc that comprises the United States of America among others came to be known as the “First World”. The Eastern socialist bloc that comprises the defunct USSR and other socialist states formed the “Second World”. The remaining parts of the world, not aligned with either bloc, were regard as the “Third World” (Okereke, and Ekpe, 2002).

“Third World” is a term used to describe underdeveloped, less developed and least developed countries of the world. Third World countries are the developing and technologically less advanced nations of Africa, Latin America and Asia. These countries are characterised by absolute poverty, underutilization of available natural and human resources, monocultural economies, excessive reliance on primary production, epileptic power supply, decaying infrastructures, and high rate of mortality and ravaging effects of preventable diseases among others.
Most Third World countries were at one time or the other in the past under colonial government, exploitation, subjugation, domination, and dehumanization. The economies of the states were brutally and criminally raped by the Imperial colonial powers and there after hastily integrated into the matrix of international capitalism. Consequently, Third World countries’ economies became disarticulated, complementarity eroded and peripherally dependent on the colonial powers several years after the so-called political independence of these nations. Most Third World countries, in the words of Onah (2017, P.58), have a very huge foreign debts.

Dependency
The concept of "dependency" coined by Cardoso (1977) helps to link both economic and political analysis; that is, it links those who are beneficiaries of development with those who make decisions. Dependency simply states that crucial economic decisions are made not by the countries that are being "developed" but by foreigners whose interests are carefully safeguarded (Offiong, 1980). Foreigners use their economic power to buy political power in countries that they penetrate. This collusion between alien economic and political power distorts both the economy and the policy of the dependent countries. The process is now complete because just as the metropolis exploits the colonies, so does the domestic colonial bourgeois class exploit the rest of the population (Frank, 1967).

Dependency is a process through which peripheral countries have been integrated as well as assimilated into the international capitalist system, and the former have experienced structural disarticulations in their domestic societies because of such assimilation and penetration (Duvall, 1978). It is a historical condition which shapes a certain structure of the world economy such that it favours some countries to the detriment of others and limits the development possibilities of the subordinates economies (Areo, 2017). Dependency is a conditioning situation in which the economies of one group of countries are conditioned by the development and expansion of others (Santos, 1971)

Development Crisis
Development crisis in the Third world is traceable to the colonial era. Devastating colonial legacies were inherited by the emerging Third world elites. The seed of development crisis which has today spread like wildfire in these parts of the world was laid during the period of colonialism, the period that was characterized by different crises such as marriage of inconvenience (Amalgamation of 1914), in some countries like Nigeria and elsewhere, disarticulation of the economy, the colonial economic structure also created a fertile ground for public corruption through the imposition of tax system as well as exploitative scheme of the European that was highly institutionalized, and leadership question in these countries.

However, some of these countries such as Nigeria among others have been experiencing violent confrontations of various magnitudes such as civil war; coups and counter coups as well as political instability that characterized these political systems since the attainment of political independence. Development crisis in the Third world has become a recurring phenomenon and despite the
atmosphere of crisis created during the colonial era, the leadership problem has become a major issue in the post-colonial Third world. The predicament of the Third world is largely attributed to colonialism, since it laid the foundations for the present development crisis experienced in these countries.

The Origin and Evolution of Dependency Theory

The Dependency Theory was developed in the late 1950s under the guidance of the then Director of the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America (ECLA), Raul Prebisch. According to Ferraro (1996), the urge to develop an analytical tool came to Raul Prebisch as a result of the established fact that economic growth in the advanced/industrialized nations did not result to economic growth in the Third World. Economic activity in the First World led to serious development crisis in the Third World. Hence, decision was taken by Prebisch and his associates to provide explanations, and consequently prescribe solutions to this problem.

According to Prebisch and his associates, the poor countries indulge in the production of primary commodities which they export to the rich countries, where they are converted into finished or semi-finished commodities, and afterwards sold back to the poor countries at exorbitant prices (Ferraro, 1996). It is worth noting that, the value added by manufacturing usable commodities are more costly than those of the primary commodities used to create these finished products in the first place. As a result of this therefore, it would be difficult for poorer countries to earn ample foreign exchange from their export of primary products in order to pay for their import of manufactured products. As a policy recommendation therefore, it was suggested that the poorer countries should embark on programme of import substitution so that they would not need to import manufactured products from the richer countries. What this means in essence is that, the poor nations would still continue to export their primary products to the richer nations so as to earn foreign exchange, but would not necessarily use such earnings to import manufactured products from abroad any longer.

However, because the policy recommendations provided by Prebisch and his associates were considered too difficult to follow and actualize other scholars of the Third World origin began to offer alternative theoretical explanations for the understanding of their development crisis. The proponents of this new or rebranded Dependency Theory include Andre Gunder Frank, Dos Santos, Henrique Cardoso, Samir Amin, Walter Rodney, Frantz Fanon, Claude Ake and Daniel Offiong among others. Dependency, according to Dos Santos one of the proponents of the theory, is defined as a:

Historical condition which shapes a certain structure of the world economy such that it favours some countries to be detriment of others and limits the development possibilities of the subordinate economies… a situation in which the economy of a certain group of countries is conditioned by the development and expansion of another economy, to which their own is subjected (Dos Santos, 1971 cited in Eke and Emeh, 2013, p. 119).
From the above definition, three common features of dependent countries are discernable. Firstly, dependency typifies the classification of the international system into two separate groups of states-dominant/dependent, centre/periphery, or metro pole/satellite. The metropolitan states are countries of advanced industrialized nations while the satellite states are countries of Africa, Latin America and Asia. Secondly, external factors rather than internal forces are responsible for the “dependency status” of the periphery. And thirdly, the relations between the centre and periphery are dynamic because these interactions between the two sets of states tend to, not only reinforce, but also intensify these unequal or asymmetrical patterns.

Furthermore, this theory attempts to explain and understand the present development crisis in the Third World from the perspective of the patterns of interactions among. State and non-state actors in the international panorama, it was argued, that the asymmetrical relationship among nations is an intrinsic part of those interactions. In summary therefore, the fundamental assumptions of the dependency theory are briefly stated below:

i. The structural configuration of the world economy and the patterns of relationships and interactions between the developed and underdeveloped countries are generally unequal.

ii. The relationships between this separate set of states is that of domination and exploitation of the underdeveloped by the developed countries.

iii. Development in the advanced capitalist countries rather than leading to the development of the underdeveloped has resulted to further underdevelopment of the underdeveloped countries.

iv. In addition to external forces, internal factors operating in the satellite countries have further led to stronger dependence of the dependent states. These internal factors, in the words of Sayigh (1991), were basically structural in nature, they are related to class structure and relations, vested interest groupings and institutions designed to serve the powerful, the rich and the influential (cited in Hamza, Muharrem and Yuksel, 2005, p.252). As stated in the foregoing, Dependency Theory draws some of its fundamental tenets from the Marxist theoretical postulations.

**Dependency Theory: A Marxist Tool for Explaining and Understanding Development Crisis in the Third World**

Axiomatically, the fundamental tenets of the Dependency Theory are substantially drawn from Marxism. It should be noted however that, in applying this theory to the Third World, Dependency scholars adopted only the elements of Marxism that are relevant to the understanding of contemporary developmental issues in their home countries. This was because according to Hamza et al (2005, p.252) the textual Marxism was not relevant to the capitalism of the 20th century which had witnessed so many changes in class power relations and orientations since Marx’s time in the Third World. In incorporating Marx’s arguments into their theories therefore, Dependency Theorists were mindful and very careful not to incorporate his propositions hook, line and sinker.
According to Reece (1983), the roots of the Dependency Theory can be found in Paul Baran’s work entitled: “Political Economy of Growth”, in which he countered the arguments of Modernization Theory. The arguments of the Modernists, according to Reece (1983), was not more than an ideological cover up and policy framework designed to ensure continued capitalist expansion which is geared towards keeping and further incorporating the Third World within the cobweb of international capitalist matrix. To Baran (1967) therefore, imperialism, far from being a major factor in industrialization, was in fact, the major encumbrance to the development drive in the Third World (cited in Reece, 1983).

To the Modernists, underdevelopment in the Third World is as a result of its inability to westernize and Europeanize its politics (and totally embrace democracy and its values), and economy (to practice capitalism to the core). To them, it is imperative for the Third World to imitate European cultural values, political and economic systems if they are to test positive to development. Similarly, Landes (1998) on his part claims that the problem of Third World underdevelopment lies in their traditional and cultural values as well as their stagnant political, social, and economic practices. He maintains that geography and culture have combined to play an important and integral role in determining which societies and nations have progressed and which ones have lagged behind. He further claims that the cultural characteristics of a society are fundamental to explaining and understanding its economic success.

From the perspective of the Dependency school of thought, Frank (1969) in Reece (1983) argued that, far from encouraging development, foreign penetration was in fact, the cause of the condition he termed “underdevelopment”. According to Frank (1969), the developed countries, at one time or the other may have been undeveloped, but they had never been underdeveloped. Frank (1969) argued that it is false to suppose that economic development occurs through the same succession of stages in all countries, or that the underdeveloped countries were merely at a stage that had been long surpassed by the developed countries (cited in Reece, 1983).

The likes of Frank (1969), and all other Dependency Theorists such as Amin (1973), Offiong (1980), Ake (1981) and Cardoso (1977) among others are of the opinion that the international capitalism has actually re-enforced a rigid international division of labour which is responsible for the development crisis of many of the Third World countries. It was Ferra (1996) who revealed that the Third World states were meant, by design, to supply cheap mineral resources, cheap agricultural commodities, and cheap labour; and that these countries also serve as the repositories of surplus capital, obsolescent technologies and manufactured goods.

Furthermore, the arguments put forward by Dependency Theory reinforces it claims, that capitalism is by nature exploitative and built on the exploitation of labour, division of labour and the predominance of capital. Marxist scholars, in the words of Zulkaflı (2018, p.3) believe that:
Capital is a result of socially productive activity, the creation of value by labour. Viewed as a “thing” capital, it has no productive powers. But viewed as a social relation, capital is productive only as an accumulation of previously expended labour power, set in motion by newly expended labour power. The process and product of socially organized labour are subordinated into private property and incorporated into the accumulation of capital.

This argument has been echoed by the Dependency Theorists, though not on the exploitation of the individual proletariat (as is mostly the argument of Marxism), but on a world or global scale or context. Scholars like Ake (1981), Frank (1969) and Baran (1967) believe that the international division of labour is usually perfected through the dominance of capital in possession of the advanced industrialized capitalist countries of the world.

In his submission, Rodney (1972) believes that the underdevelopment of the Third World can be attributed to European imperial colonialism. According to him, colonialism had no gain for the Third World, contrary to the argument of imperialism that colonialism was a win-win situation between the colonized and the colonizers. Arguing from a dependency theoretical perspective, Rodney (1972; p.246) had this to say:

To be specific, it must be noted that colonialism crushed by force the surviving feudal-states of North-Africa; that the French wiped out the large Muslim states of the western Sudan, as well as Dalhomey and kingdoms in Madagascar; that the British eliminated Egypt, the Mahdist Sudan, Asante, Benin the Yoruba Kingdoms, Swaziland, Matabeleland, the Lozi and the East African Lake Kingdoms as great states. It should further be noted that a multiplicity of smaller and growing states were by the Belgians, Portuguese, British, French, Germans, Spaniards and Italians. Finally, those that appeared to survive were nothing but puppet creations.

The dialectical inter-phase that occurred during European colonization left the Third World wrecked psychologically, socially, culturally, economically, politically, militarily and otherwise. The attendant consequences of colonization were not only in terms of political domination but also socio-political domination, slavery and economic exploitation, racial and cultural devastation. In fact, the colonizers actually destroyed the philosophical and religious base of Africa and foisted European system as an alternative. Thus, colonial experience left two broad “legacies” on Africa: denial of African identity and the foisting of Western thought and cultural realities and perspectives on Africans (Chukwuokolo, 2009).

The relevance of the Dependency Theory as a Marxist tool for explaining and understanding the development crisis in the Third World notwithstanding, this theoretical model has been criticised on the following grounds:

i. The theory uses highly abstract levels of analysis. It fails to provide an
exhaustive empirical evidence to backup its conclusions.

ii. The theory overemphasizes external ties and relationship while de-emphasizing the dynamics of internal forces.

iii. Also, some critics have questioned whether the Dependency Theory still has a unified and coherent message for contemporary states, taking into cognizance the facts that it reflects the conditions and understanding of the 1960s coupled with the established fact that it has experienced several divisions since its initial formulation.

iv. The Dependency theory has been queried for erroneously considering links with Multi-National Corporations (MNCs) as being only detrimental to the Third World, when in actual sense such links could be used as a means of transferring technology from the West. In this case, it is imperative to note that even the United States of America was once a British colony, but has been able to break the vicious circle of underdevelopment to become one of the leading industrialized nations of the world (Reyes, 2002). The same is possible with the Third World.

Conclusion and Policy Recommendations
The major argument of the dependency theory is that the development of Europe and North America on the one hand and the underdevelopment of the Third world on the other hand can be explained by the same historical process which started over 500 years ago with the advent of slave trade. The absence of productive element of the labour force for over 300 years resulted to both, economic and technological stagnation or arrest.

Technological stagnation occurred because of the inability to pass technology and development skills from one generation to another. Economic stagnation was due to the fact that the aged population left behind was incapable of growing the economy. This actually laid the foundation for the development crisis in the Third world.

Based on the conclusion reached in this paper, the following recommendations have therefore been made to help the Third world have a holistic and comprehensive understanding of its development crisis and also break the vicious circle of underdevelopment:

i. Third World countries should try all they could to maximally benefit from their ties with Multi-National Corporations rather than seeing them as impediments to development.

ii. Human capital development is very vital for the development of any nation. It behoves on the governments of the Third World countries such as Nigeria among others, to invest massively in the development of the educational sector. A situation whereby lecturers of government owned Universities are allowed to go on strike for several months due to lack of motivation, as is usually the case with Nigeria, is not healthy for the development agenda.

iii. There is also the need to reduce ties with the former colonial masters in the areas of foreign aids, foreign ideas/models, and externally motivated public policies, if the Third world is to experience auto centric development.
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