

REVIEWS

## Claudio Katz, *Dependency Theory after Fifty Years: The Continuing Relevance of Latin American Critical Thought*

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Felipe Antunes de Oliveira

Queen Mary University of London

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Some five decades after its heyday, dependency theory is undergoing a surprising revival. The literature now available in English is way more diverse and deeper than it used to be just a decade ago. With a few honourable exceptions, until very recently teachers of dependency in Global North universities would largely rely on Andre Gunder Frank's classical texts of the 1960s or inaccurate summaries and encyclopaedia entries from authors with little knowledge of the vast Latin American dependency school, not to mention little patience for its nuances. Claudio Katz's newly translated book, *Dependency Theory after Fifty Years*, is first and foremost a great resource to teach dependency theory, offering a very valuable contribution to the current dependency revival.

The last decade saw the emergence or re-emergence of three distinct but deeply related streams of dependency scholarship. First, classical texts, in particular the *Dialectics of Dependency*, by Ruy Mauro Marini, were finally translated into English (Monthly Review Press, 2022). Relatedly, Latin American authors closely connected to the older generation of *dependentistas*, such as Carlos Eduardo Martins, Jaime Osório and Adrián Sotelo Valencia, also had some important works translated. Second, a new generation of authors – including Ingrid Kvangraven, Martín Arboleda, Mariano Félix, Joana Salém Vasconcellos, Aldo Madariaga, Stefano Palestini, Sebastián Baeza-Gozáles and several others – began revisiting, expanding and re-signifying dependency concepts and ideas to tackle contemporary issues or intervene in contemporary debates.

Katz's book is part of a third strain of dependency literature, which in a way can act as a bridge between the previous two. *Dependency Theory after Fifty Years* is a comprehensive stock-taking of classical dependency theory, with particular emphasis on Marxist authors. The book thus belongs on the same shelf as Cristóbal Kay's landmark *Latin American Theories of Development and Underdevelopment* (Routledge, 1989), and Margarita Fajardo's more recent *The World Latin America Created* (Harvard University Press, 2022). It also largely overlaps with Cláudia Wasserman's *A teoria da dependência: Do nacional-desenvolvimentismo ao neoliberalismo* (FGV Editora, 2017), unfortunately still unavailable in English. All these books have in common the ambition to situate

dependency ideas in their historical and intellectual context while engaging critically with them and explaining them to a larger audience. They form, therefore, a growing historiography of dependency ideas, giving substance to the claim widely repeated by the new generation of *dependentistas* that dependency theory is not a unified theory, but actually a diverse school of thought.

Within that historiography, *Dependency Theory after Fifty Years* stands out for a few distinctive features. First, Katz's clear, direct and accessible style of writing, based on very short, one- or two-page subsections, makes this book particularly useful as an introduction to dependency theory. Whereas it lacks the richer historical texture of Fajardo's *The World Latin America Created*, it does a great job of summarising and presenting key ideas and debates to new readers. Katz avoids common mistakes often seen in introductions to dependency theory written by non-specialists, such as confusing dependency theory and Latin American developmentalism, or presenting Fernando Henrique Cardoso's ideas as a progressive evolution of dependency debates. Furthermore, the book is also the first one in the English language to explore in any depth the work of Agustín Cueva, one of the early dependency authors, whose contribution is today all but forgotten, particularly outside Latin America.

The deep dive into the concepts of 'sub-imperialism' and 'super-exploitation' in Chapters 9–11 and the reflections about dependency theory and Marxist theory of value in Chapter 14 are the most theoretically sophisticated parts of the book, potentially sparking debates with other readings of Marini's seminal ideas. Beyond offering comprehensive definitions of these concepts, Katz dares to update them and apply them to contemporary geopolitical situations, tackling, for instance, the question about the putative sub-imperialist character of contemporary Brazilian capitalism (p. 174). The reconceptualisation of super-exploitation as the relatively lower remuneration of labour power in the global periphery (p. 197) is certainly controversial but has the merit of reviving a very fecund debate.

*Dependency Theory after Fifty Years* is, therefore, at once an accessible introduction and a sophisticated original reading of classical dependency theory. At times, however, these two aspects of the book coexist with some tension. For instance, Part 1 and Part 2 work better as an introduction to Marxism, dependency theory and surrounding ideas. The relationship between dependency theory and Trotsky's idea of uneven and combined development is mentioned but not explored in any historical or theoretical depth and remains a big blind spot in the dependency theory historiography more generally. The fundamental absence in the book, however, is any engagement with the newer generation of dependency authors and key contemporary concerns such as extractivism, ecological destruction, patriarchal oppression, racialisation and coloniality. Although the book was originally published in Spanish in 2018 and the author is not really part of the first generation of *dependentistas*, he is somewhat closer to them than to contemporary *dependentistas*, who are generally more interested in taking inspiration from dependency ideas to intervene in the contemporary world than in the exegesis of classical dependency works. From this perspective, the book's title is quite accurate. Indeed, Katz does a stellar critical stock-taking of the first 50 years of dependency theory, sometimes even attempting some historical updating. Nevertheless, if readers are looking for insights to intervene in contemporary academic and political debates and for


potential clashes, complementarities and overlaps between dependency theory and other contemporary theoretical perspectives, they will need to complement this book with some additional readings from contemporary authors.

In summary, *Dependency Theory after Fifty Years* is a mandatory book in any dependency theory collection and a very welcome teaching resource. With this translation, Katz offers to an English-reading audience a good taste of some of the highly sophisticated and original debates emerging from Marxist dependency theory. From now on, boring, repetitive or inaccurate dependency syllabi can no longer be blamed on the lack of literature in English.

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## **Javier Corrales, *Autocracy Rising: How Venezuela Transitioned to Authoritarianism***

**Brookings Institution Press, 2023, pp. xiv + 242**

Laura Gamboa 

University of Utah

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For most of the second half of the twentieth century, Venezuela was probably the most promising democracy in Latin America. Today, it is one of the most authoritarian regimes in the region. What happened? In his book – *Autocracy Rising: How Venezuela Transitioned to Authoritarianism* – Javier Corrales answers that question. Leveraging an impressive amount of evidence, he provides a detailed account of Venezuela’s autocratisation process, focusing on the effects of party system fragmentation and learnt authoritarian practices and policies.

Corrales splits Venezuela’s autocratisation process into two stages. The first stage analyses the transition from a democratic regime into an authoritarian regime under Hugo Chávez (1999–2013). Democratic backsliding, he argues, is more likely under conditions of ‘asymmetric party system fragmentation’ (APSF). In the dispute for political supremacy (the Hobbesian Moment, as Julio Carrión calls it), an electorally strong unified ruling party facing a fragmented uncompetitive opposition facilitates the erosion of democracy (*A Dynamic Theory of Populism in Power: The Andes in Comparative Perspective* (Oxford University Press, 2022)). Not only does it enable the government to enact legislation that thwarts democratic institutions but it hinders the opposition’s ability to oppose it.

In Chapter 2, Corrales illustrates this part of the argument. During his government, the author shows, Chávez transformed Venezuela into a competitive authoritarian regime using ‘autocratic legalism’ (i.e. the selective application of the law), ‘constitutional tinkering’ (i.e. constitution amendment or replacement)