

Student Feature – Theory in Action: Global South Perspectives on Development

Written by Lina Benabdallah, Carlos Murillo-Zamora and Victor Adetula

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LINA BENABDALLAH, CARLOS MURILLO-ZAMORA AND VICTOR ADETULA, SEP 17 2019

This is adapted from *International Relations Theory* (2017). Get your free copy of the textbook here.

Many of the policies that shape international politics today are based on assumptions that originate in Western modes of thinking. Take, for example, 'development' – a word that has the power to dictate national and international policies and attract or divert vast sums of money. This can be seen through the United Nations' Millennium Development Goals and their successors, the Sustainable Development Goals. These involve targets that every country in the world agreed to strive towards and to fund. They are based on an understanding of development that sees many countries in the Global South as not having yet achieved the economic progress of the North.

Perhaps one of the greatest contributions of Latin American scholars to IR theory is dependency theory, which challenges dominant understandings of development as an organising principle in international politics. Dependency theory asserts that underdevelopment and poverty are the result of political, economic and cultural influences exerted on such countries from the outside. It presents the relationship between the Global South and the Global North as exploitative and unfair by underlining the ways in which states in the South have been incorporated into the world economic system through capitalist development, which has exploited human and material resources and disrupted indigenous modes of production. Dependency theory analyses the way in which the underdevelopment of many states in the South might be a direct result of the policies, interventions and unfair trading practices of states from the North. From this perspective, the current (unfair) economic relations between the Global North and South will not help the South to develop at all. Rather, they will keep the South poorer than the North. Rather than the need for states in the Global South to 'develop', dependency theory stresses that nothing short of a restructuring of the entire international economic system will deliver economic justice for the world's poor.

Building on the likes of dependency theory, scholars have demonstrated that the economic exploitation of many colonised nations did not stop with decolonisation. In fact, in the final years of colonialism – at the time when independence movements were becoming too strong to suppress – the departing colonial powers instigated a number of policies and programmes that paved the way for a new type of domination of Global South economies. The legacy of such policies was an emphasis on the production of cash crops for export, dependence on foreign financial interventions and the entrenchment of private capital (both domestic and foreign) as the engine of growth and development. North–South trade agreements and the policies of international organisations such as the World Trade Organization have further served to protect the interests of established powers despite repeated calls from the South for a fairer deal in global trade relations. They have served to privilege 'developed' states in trade relationships and to disadvantage the former 'developing' colonies. Viewed from the North, such policies are an instrument for helping the South. However, viewed from the South, they are tantamount to a new type of colonial domination – often referred to as 'neo-colonialism' – in that they represent a continuation of unequal and exploitative North–South relationships.

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Mainstream IR theories emerging from Western societies largely seek rational explanations for states' interactions. However, some scholars have started to explore the motivations behind interactions between states in the Global South from a relational perspective. An example of this emphasis on relationality can be seen in China's interactions with various African states. In 2015 China became the African continent's largest trading partner. Chinese investments across Africa include natural resource extractions, infrastructure construction, real estate and information technology. African and Chinese economies are mutually interdependent in that China imports a lot of energy sources from the continent and African states in return import consumer goods, commodities, and technology from China. Most African states, however, import far more than they export to China and suffer from un- balanced trade relations.

China's development model (the Beijing Consensus) differs from the neoliberal model of development advocated by the International Monetary Fund and other Western-led organisations (the Washington Consensus). The Washington Consensus' emphasis on liberalisation and minimising the role of the state in the market has been denounced by many African leaders as neocolonial and exploitative. By contrast, the Beijing Consensus, with its emphasis on the principle of non-interference, has presented an attractive alternative to some African countries. Furthermore, while China certainly benefits economically from its developmental role in African states, enhancing cultural dialogue and cultivating networks through people-to-people exchanges also seem to be important motivating factors behind its interventions.

Dive Deeper

Two podcasts ([here](#) and [here](#)) exploring China-Africa issues
A reading list from the LSE

As well as funding Confucius Institutes across the continent of Africa showcasing Chinese language and culture, the Chinese government has sponsored 200,000 opportunities for training professionals, academics, journalists and public servants from all corners of Africa. For more, see [here](#). It is part of constructing a shared identity based on future aspirations and trajectories that will lift citizens out of poverty. Whether or not China's approach in Africa is in fact a genuinely new type of development policy is subject to heated debate among scholars. But the point here is that China is keen to be seen to adopt a more relational approach, as opposed to the rational one of the North. Indeed, this concept is not exclusively Chinese – it also extends to other societies within the Global South and offers an alternative way of theorising South-South relations to the perspectives that have emerged from the North.

In recent years a lot has been done to highlight the important contributions that actors from the Global South make, and have always made, to international relations. Indeed, IR as a discipline has come a long way in incorporating aspects, actors and concepts that represent the world more widely. Yet, as the dynamics of the international system continue to change with the emergence of new economic powers such as India, China, Brazil, Turkey as well as other rising economies, IR will need to do more to pay attention to the perspectives of those in the South. Global South perspectives not only challenge the dominant theoretical perspectives that have served to create and perpetuate unjust relations between the Global North and South, they also open up the possibility of different, fairer relations that represent the interests of all concerned and challenge international institutions to have more representative power structures and decision-making processes.

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