

'Dependency ambiguity': how Brazilian business schools contextualised knowledge to cope with local needs

*As a new breed of government administrators was needed to foster Brazil's industrial development in the 1950s, business schools became necessary to train those managers and public administrators. **Sergio Wanderley, Rafael Alcadipani, and Amon Barros** write that these emerging business schools didn't simply import Americanised ideas. They contextualised knowledge to cope with Brazilian needs, engaging with dependency studies and critical social thinking. "Dependency ambiguity" allows us to understand how US inspiration was used against US pretensions, aiming at an autonomous Brazil.*

We investigate the history of business schools (BS) in Brazil via dependency studies, a Latin American theoretical construction later reframed with Marxist tones that became known as dependency theory. Dependency is the condition of a hierarchical relationship between two or more economies that become entangled for the benefit of the richer countries. Dependency studies aim to examine dependent conditions prevailing since colonial times to overcome them. We use in particular the concepts of Brazilian sociologist/economist [Theotonio dos Santos](#) (Santos, 1970), one of the founders of dependency theory.

Dependency studies are associated with the United Nations (UN) regional development agency Economic Commission for Latin America (ECLAC), created in Santiago, Chile, in 1948. For dependency theory, underdevelopment is not a step coming before development, but a process entangled with global and local histories. Dependency studies sees capitalist development as polarising, with differences between countries tending to persist. Dependency becomes ingrained in Latin America's long-term history.

The perspective we adopt in this paper offers a non-orthodox view of how Brazilian business schools developed. They did not totally reject foreign influence but tried to subordinate these forces to Brazilian interests. Brazilian business schools are therefore not only the result of Americanisation, but an outcome of Brazil's interest in overcoming technological-industrial dependency.

The first five undergraduate programmes in management were established between 1937 and 1961. Over that same period, Brazil witnessed a heavy push towards industrial development. We argue that dependency macro factors were the main drivers behind the creation, implementation, and dissemination of business schools in Brazil.

After the 1929 crisis, during and after World War II, the Brazilian governments actively pushed for administrative restructuring and intervened in the economy to promote industrialisation via import substitution, as theorised by ECLAC in the 1950's. Hence, a new breed of government administrators was needed to foster industrial development, capable of organising public financing to the private sector and of leading trailblazer public companies directly involved in fostering local infrastructure and the business environment as spillover effects. Private companies became partners in this process and demanded managers who were capable of commanding new industrial ventures.

Business schools became necessary to train those managers and public administrators. Consequently, development administration management was key to management education in this initial period. The development of management as a science was directly linked with economic development. Local agents performed dependency ambiguity, i.e., the selective appropriation of knowledge and support from the dominating country to overcome dependency from that same country. Industrial leaders were behind the first business school created and found strong support in presidents Getúlio Vargas (1930-1945; 1951-1954) and Juscelino Kubitschek (1956-1960). The pace of industrial development reached in Brazil during that period has never been matched.

Moreover, business schools contextualised knowledge to cope with Brazilian needs. They did not offer solely mimicked US management education content, but also taught and engaged with dependency studies and critical social thinking, counter-balancing the weight of US management education content. Hence, dependency ambiguity highlights the national effort to overcome the subordinated condition, decentring Americanisation as the key explanation in the history of business schools.

Therefore, we departed from a body of literature that usually shapes macro-analysis and showed how it played out in practice in Brazilian business schools. In this way, we focused on Brazilian interests rather than seeing local developments as mere Americanisation. Moreover, the literature on the history of business schools tends to analyse specific institutions or macro-regions without emphasising specificities and singularities of different schools. We highlighted local differences, for example, in how US influence varies among institutions. The strength of the US influence varied even in the same country according to local logics. If we look at the history of business schools through dependency lenses, we see local macro-factors impacting local hybridism that go unaccounted for in Americanisation stories, that puts the US and its interests as the primary and causal explanatory motive.

We propose several elements that scholars should consider developing and researching, to write and think about new histories of business schools in the peripheries. We reposition the narratives emphasising the role of local contextual factors and actors within Global South countries dependency *longue durée*. The empirical evidence on how Brazilian actors responsible for the organisation of Brazilian business schools performed dependency ambiguity is our contribution to dependency studies in reframing the past. Dependency ambiguity allows us to understand how US inspiration was used against US pretensions and towards an autonomous Brazil.

Dependency is a concept that may help us recentre the Global South to recover local theorisations, such as those proposed by dependency studies scholars—*dependentistas*—and it may enable us to face the imposition of knowledge from the Global North. This is a way to replace imported ideas and reconnect local realities generating reflexive management learning and education.



Notes:

- This blog post is based on [Re-Centering the Global South in the Making of Business School Histories: Dependency Ambiguity in Action](#), Academy of Management Learning & Education
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