

Class, Dependency, and Resistance: Toward a Pluralist Framework for African International Relations

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ABSTRACT

The resurgence of interest in IR theories such as Marxism and Dependency Theory illuminates the complexities facing African states in the context of postcolonial challenges and systemic global inequalities. China's burgeoning influence in Africa often replicates exploitative patterns reminiscent of Western models, further entrenching conditions of resource extraction and elite capture. This paper proposes a conceptual framework grounded in Historical Specificity, Political Economy, and Agency and Praxis, offering a nuanced perspective on Africa's role in international relations. Historical Specificity contextualizes Africa's unique experiences, while Political Economy unveils the internal and external structures sustaining its marginalization. Agency and Praxis foregrounds the capacity of African actors to resist and reshape their global engagements, exemplified by initiatives like the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA). The framework is used to analyze three key journal articles on Marxism and Dependency giving room to suggest pathways for pluralistic emancipation of Africa. Emphasizing the necessity for a reorientation of African International Relations away from Eurocentric paradigms, this analysis showcases the need for theoretical frameworks that reflect historical realities and class dynamics specific to the African continent. By challenging existing universal assumptions in International Relations, this study culminates in a plural and emancipatory framework that recognizes potentials of Africa as a dynamic contributor to global discourse rather than a passive recipient, transforming scholarship and practice in African engagement with the international system.

Keywords: African International Relations (AIR); vulgar-Marxism; neo-dependency; Class; Afro-experiences

INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary reconfiguration of the global political economy, the relevance of classical theories such as Marxism and Dependency Theory has gained renewed scholarly interest, especially as African states continue to navigate postcolonial realities, global inequality, and the asymmetries of international systems (Rodney, 1972; Mkandawire, 2011; Cheru, 2002). These theories, though developed in different geopolitical contexts, remain useful in interrogating the structural dependencies and class-based dynamics that persist across the continent. African international relations (AIR) are shaped not only by the legacy of colonialism but also by evolving geopolitical interests, such as the rise of China and the expansion of neoliberal economic regimes (Ake, 1981; Taylor, 2009). While these dynamics are complex and multi-scalar, they continue to influence Africa's capacity for autonomous development, political agency, and global representation (Zezeza, 2006; Adesina, 2006).

Orthodox Marxist frameworks offer a foundational lens through which to understand global capitalism, class formation, and the accumulation of capital. However, their direct application to African contexts often encounters limitations, primarily because they tend to universalize European historical experiences (Alavi, 1972; Mamdani, 1996). Jean Copans (1985) critiques this transposition, particularly the application of classical class categories such as bourgeoisie and proletariat, in African societies where kinship, lineage systems, and ethnic affiliations significantly shape socio-economic life. According to Copans, class must be understood not as a static or imported construct but as a product of specific historical, cultural, and political configurations. This view is echoed in the works of other Africanist scholars who advocate for context-specific interpretations of class and state-society relations (Kasera, 2025; Bayart, 1993; Chabal & Daloz, 1999; Geschiere, 2009).

Kwesi Botchwey (1977) adds another layer to this critical reformulation by addressing the reductionist tendencies of some Marxist analyses that overemphasize economic determinism. He argues that in African contexts, ideological formations, pre-colonial traditions, and post-independence political arrangements must be integrated into any robust Marxist interpretation. Botchwey's call aligns with a broader body of scholarship that has questioned the applicability of rigid economic determinism to African modes of production and state formation (Bates, 1981; Mbembe, 2001). Instead, Botchwey (1977) proposes an intellectually autonomous Marxist discourse that takes into account the nuances of Africa's historical trajectories, particularly the role of the African petty bourgeoisie and the co-optation of the postcolonial elite into global capitalist structures (Fanon, 1963; Shivji, 2009).

The relevance of dependency theory, particularly its critique of global capitalism and neocolonialism, remains significant in this discussion. Early dependency theorists like Amin (1976) and Andre Frank (1967) emphasized the structural subordination of peripheral economies to the core, highlighting patterns of resource extraction, trade imbalance, and technological dependency. These dependencies concluded that the solution was to be delinking the South from the North, pursuing South-South cooperation. However, Mason (2016) updates this analysis by interrogating the implications of China's expanding economic and geopolitical footprint in Africa. His work reveals how the so-called "South-South cooperation" between China and African states—framed as mutual and non-imperial—can nonetheless reproduce asymmetrical relationships akin to those seen under traditional North-South dependencies (Bräutigam, 2009; Mohan & Power, 2008). Mason (2016) specifically critiques China's involvement in African oil diplomacy, infrastructure development, and peacekeeping operations, noting that these interactions may represent a "new dependency" that disrupts, but does not dismantle, historical patterns of external domination.

This new terrain of engagement calls for a reassessment of the original formulations of dependency theory, particularly as Africa finds itself caught between competing global interests in a multipolar world (Hurrell, 2006; Carmody & Taylor, 2010). Despite the rhetoric of mutual benefit and "win-win" development, China's influence in Africa often mirrors past Western models in terms of resource extraction, elite capture, and conditional financial flows (Kasera et al., 2024; Large, 2008; Tan-Mullins et al., 2010). This reinforces the urgency of rethinking Africa's external relations through a lens that captures the complexities of both historic and emergent forms of dependency.

Against this background, the present paper is founded on a keen interrogation of three foundational theoretical works—Botchwey (1977), Copans (1985), and Mason (2017). The paper is presented in five main sections. Following this introduction is a presentation of the conceptual framework that ties the works analyzed together. The findings section is divided into three parts, basically coinciding with each of the three authors whose works are used for analysis. These works are analyzed independently to uncover the distinctive contributions they make to our understanding of African international relations. Each author offers an interrelated entry point into the challenges of adapting classical Marxist and dependency theories to African realities. In the fourth section, discussion section, the study synthesizes key insights to and draw on empirical evidence from across sub-Saharan African countries. The empirical illustration enables the present analysis to propose a framework for rethinking AIR that is both historically grounded and politically responsive to contemporary conditions in the fifth and last section, conclusion section. The conclusion utilizes the conceptual framework to suggest pathways to pluralistic emancipation of Africa. Importantly, these suggestions constitute pathways for constructing a self-determined, theoretically autonomous African approach to international relations—one capable of navigating the global terrain of power, dependency, and resistance. Peculiar cases are identified across the discussion and conclusion sections, are identified, but these are only exceptional as most African countries have fallen under the trap of enmeshment into the asymmetric global political economy that is perpetuated, in part, by vulgar Marxism and neo-dependency schemes of Neo-colonizers like China.

THE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

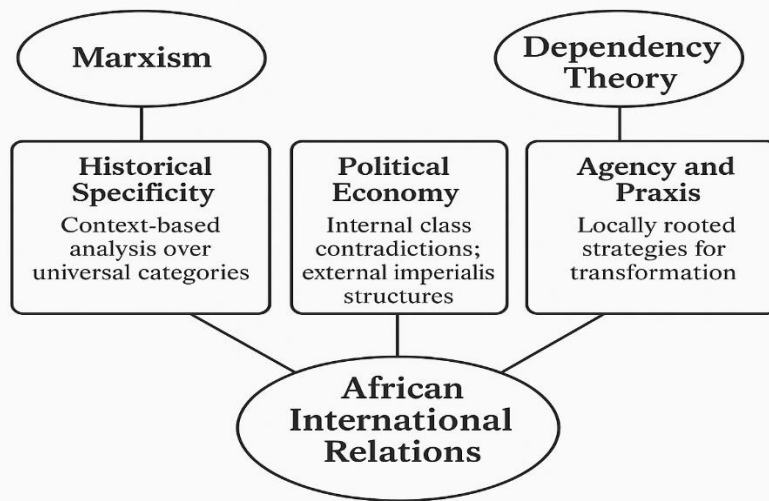
This section advances a conceptual framework that aids the study in contextualizing the interrelationships between African International Relations (AIR), Marxism, and Dependency Theory. As illustrated in the diagram below, the framework builds on the assumption that Africa's integration into global capitalism has

historically been asymmetrical, often reinforcing structural dependency and underdevelopment. The framework positions both Marxism and Dependency Theory not as static or foreign impositions but as adaptable, critical traditions that—when reinterpreted through Africa’s historical and political experience—offer a compelling lens through which to reimagine AIR. This conceptual synthesis anchors analysis along three interconnected dimensions: Historical Specificity, Political Economy, and Agency and Praxis. Each dimension allows for a more nuanced understanding of Africa’s position in global politics and provides the conceptual tools needed to rethink Africa not merely as a recipient of global influence, but as a dynamic contributor to international theory and political transformation.

Historical Specificity is foundational to this framework because it challenges the universalism of dominant IR theories, which often assume linear state formation, developmental homogeneity, and ahistorical state behavior. In contrast, African states have emerged from profoundly disruptive processes: conquest, colonial partition, and artificial state formation that ignored indigenous political systems and economies (Mamdani, 1996). For instance, the Berlin Conference (1884–85) carved up the continent based on imperial interests, laying the groundwork for postcolonial states whose sovereignty has remained juridical rather than empirical (Jackson & Rosberg, 1982). Marxism, when read through African lenses, accounts for how historical material conditions—such as the introduction of cash crops, land alienation, and labor migration—produced unique class formations that defy orthodox categories (Amin, 1972; Copans, 1985). Dependency Theory complements this by emphasizing how these historical disruptions were not isolated events, but the foundational mechanisms through which Africa was incorporated into the world economy as a source of raw materials and cheap labor. Thus, this dimension encourages an analysis that is rooted in temporal depth and spatial particularity, allowing us to account for how historical legacies of violence, extraction, and marginalization continue to shape contemporary international engagements.

The second dimension, Political Economy, provides a dual lens for examining both internal and external power structures that perpetuate Africa's peripheral status. Marxist theory interrogates the internal contradictions within African states—particularly the rise of comprador elites who mediate between global capital and domestic accumulation processes. For example, the post-independence regimes in countries like Côte d’Ivoire and Kenya saw the consolidation of domestic bourgeois classes that thrived on international aid, foreign investment, and rent-seeking behavior, often to the detriment of broad-based economic development (Mkandawire & Soludo, 1999). Simultaneously, Dependency Theory brings into focus the persistent structural subordination of African economies within the global capitalist system. Through mechanisms such as unequal trade terms, debt dependency, and the imposition of neoliberal policies via structural adjustment programs, Africa has been systematically locked into exporting primary commodities while importing finished goods—reinforcing economic stagnation and technological dependency (Rodney, 1972; Mason, 2017). The framework thus underscores the importance of analyzing Africa’s global position not as a consequence of domestic failures alone, but as the outcome of intersecting global and local economic systems designed to extract surplus rather than enable self-reliant growth.

The third and most transformative dimension is Agency and Praxis, which insists on recognizing African actors as not merely reactive or victimized, but as capable agents of resistance, reimagination, and reconstruction. This dimension draws from both Fanonian and neo-Marxist traditions that foreground praxis—action informed by ideological clarity and historical understanding—as the means of social transformation. African agency is evident in both state-led and grassroots initiatives that challenge the existing global order. For example, the creation of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) represents an attempt to bypass dependency on former colonial trading blocs by strengthening intra-African trade and continental bargaining power (UNECA, 2021). Similarly, intellectual initiatives such as the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA) work to decolonize knowledge production and generate alternative African-centered theoretical frameworks in IR and development studies (Zondi, 2018). Even at the diplomatic level, coordinated African Union responses—such as during the COVID-19 pandemic via the Africa Vaccine Acquisition Task Team (AVATT)—demonstrated strategic capacity to circumvent Western-dominated supply chains and negotiate from a position of collective strength (Achille & Mbembe, 2021). This framework, therefore, affirms that Africa is not devoid of strategy or vision; rather, it often confronts systemic barriers that must be dismantled through collective ideological, institutional, and material struggle.



Conceptual Framework Diagram showing Conceptual Interaction Between AIR, Marxism and Dependency Theory

Source: Author's own derivation from Botchwey (1977), Copans (1985) & Mason (2017).

FINDINGS

Demystifying the Rise of Vulgar Marxism in African Scholarship and Political Rhetoric

In *Marxism and the Analysis of the African Reality*, Kwesi Botchwey (1977) mounts a forceful critique against the rising tide of anti-Marxist sentiment in African academic and political discourse. He argues that much of this hostility stems not from a substantive engagement with Marxist theory, but from superficial or misinformed interpretations that often rely on outdated or misrepresented critiques. According to Botchwey, these dismissals are not only intellectually lazy but also politically dangerous, as they obscure the potential of Marxism to offer a rigorous, contextually sensitive analysis of African socio-economic and political conditions.

Botchwey identifies three persistent distortions of Marxist thought—what he terms manifestations of “vulgar Marxism”¹—that have taken root in African discussions. First is the mistaken belief that Marxism posits a crude economic determinism, wherein the economic base rigidly dictates all elements of the superstructure. Second is the assumption that Marxist theory implies a universal and linear sequence of societal development through fixed historical stages. Third is the claim that Marxism is inherently Eurocentric and therefore inapplicable to African historical and cultural realities. Each of these points, Botchwey argues, is based on a fundamental misreading of Marxist texts and a failure to grasp dialectical materialism as a methodological approach.

The critique of economic determinism, Botchwey explains, misrepresents Marx's nuanced view of the relationship between the economic base and the superstructure. While economic conditions are foundational in shaping societal relations, Marx never suggested that they operate in isolation from political or ideological forces. Indeed, Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Mao all emphasized the complex interplay between economic structures and state power, highlighting the role of politics in enabling or obstructing economic transformation. The misconception that Marxism sidelines the state stems from neglecting these debates and from reading Marxism as a formula rather than a historically grounded analysis. Botchwey warns that privileging political reform over a deeper interrogation of class and production relations leads to superficial solutions that fail to challenge the root causes of African underdevelopment.

¹ A reductionist interpretation of Marxism that ignores historical context and reduces complex social dynamics to simple economic determinism. Adherents show case a misunderstanding (and a failure to read Marx's works by self) of Karl Marx, and failure to appreciate that similar criticisms they raise on Marxism were already raised and settled by previous scholars. Ne-depe

The second distortion—that Marxism insists on a uniform developmental path—betrays a misunderstanding of dialectical materialism’s emphasis on contradiction and specificity. Botchwey stresses that Marx rejected the idea of a rigid historical determinism. Drawing on Marx’s later writings and correspondence, particularly his reflections on non-Western societies, Botchwey shows that Marx acknowledged the potential for multiple developmental trajectories shaped by local conditions. The stages of historical development—such as feudalism, capitalism, and socialism—were never meant to be applied dogmatically across all societies. Instead, they served as heuristic tools for understanding how specific material conditions influence social change. This insight is crucial for Africa, where colonial disruption, uneven capitalist integration, and diverse precolonial formations defy simplistic models of linear progression.

The third major critique Botchwey addresses is the accusation that Marxism is Eurocentric and thus unsuitable for analyzing African societies. This claim, he argues, arises from a failure to distinguish between Marx’s empirical focus—largely on European capitalism—and the broader methodological and analytical tools he developed. While Marx’s case studies were situated in Europe, the underlying logic of historical materialism, especially its emphasis on labor relations, class struggle, and modes of production, is universally applicable. Botchwey advocates for a scientific, rather than metaphysical, reading of African pre-capitalist societies—one that avoids romanticizing them as static or harmonious. Instead, Marxist tools can be deployed to excavate the dynamic and often contradictory economic and social structures that existed long before colonialism.

Botchwey underscores the importance of investigating the class character of the African state, particularly the role of the petty bourgeoisie and comprador elites. He argues that one of the central dangers to Marxist analysis in Africa today lies not only in overt anti-Marxism but in pseudo-Marxist interpretations that distort the theory’s revolutionary core. Misconceptions such as locating exploitation solely in the sphere of market exchange, or blaming the European working class for Africa’s subjugation, are analytical shortcuts that dilute Marxism’s critical edge. These views obscure the reality of how global capitalism operates through local elites and transnational class alliances to perpetuate African dependency and underdevelopment.

At the heart of Botchwey’s intervention is a call for ideological clarity and theoretical rigor. Marxism, he insists, must be understood not merely as an academic exercise but as a revolutionary practice aimed at transforming the material conditions of the oppressed. Its relevance to African international relations lies in its capacity to link internal class structures with the external pressures of imperialism, dependency, and global capitalism. By rejecting both vulgar distortions and uncritical applications, African scholars and activists can reclaim Marxism as a potent tool for understanding and reshaping the continent’s position in the international system.

Botchwey’s critique of vulgar Marxism aligns with the conceptual framework advanced in this study, which situates African international relations at the intersection of endogenous political economy, historical-structural constraints, and external systemic forces. His insistence on a dialectical, non-dogmatic reading of Marxism reinforces the need for frameworks that recognize African agency as both structured and situational—mediated by domestic class dynamics, the inherited architecture of colonial capitalism, and global hierarchies. The model developed here, which foregrounds the interplay between state-society relations, elite-class formation, and global political economy, echoes Botchwey’s warning against superficial analyses that either externalize causality or reduce African realities to moral binaries. In identifying the petty bourgeoisie and comprador elites as conduits of external capital and ideological capture, Botchwey anticipates the analytical lens through which the African state in this framework is examined: not as a neutral arbiter but as a class-structured institution embedded within both local contradictions and global circuits of accumulation. Thus, Botchwey’s call for intellectual discipline and revolutionary praxis not only deconstructs prevailing ideological distortions but also validates the framework’s commitment to a historically situated, class-conscious, and praxis-oriented analysis of African international relations. By weaving together material conditions, ideological production, and geopolitical structures, the conceptual diagram operationalizes Botchwey’s vision of a grounded and emancipatory Marxist tradition, one capable of reclaiming Africa’s role not as a passive recipient but as an active—and contested—agent in global politics.

Rethinking Class in Marxism – Beyond Eurocentric Paradigms

Jean Copans' 1985 analysis of the Marxist conception of class in Africa offers a critical interrogation of the applicability of classical Marxist theory to the historical and socio-economic realities of West African societies. At the heart of Copans' work is a compelling critique of the uncritical transplantation of European class categories onto African contexts, a tendency that has dominated both Marxist and modernization discourses. His approach is fundamentally historical and reflexive, emphasizing the need to rethink class not as a universal abstraction, but as a historically contingent and contextually specific phenomenon. Through a careful engagement with Marxist theory, Copans illustrates the limits of orthodox class analysis when faced with the complexities of African social formations.

In examining the socio-economic structures of West Africa, Copans foregrounds the fluid and often ambiguous nature of class distinctions. Unlike in capitalist Europe, where class can be analytically anchored in ownership of the means of production and relations of labor, West African societies are characterized by overlapping communal, ethnic, and kinship-based systems that complicate such clear-cut delineations. The presence of tribal affiliations, clan loyalties, and traditional authority structures blurs the boundaries between emerging social classes, making it difficult to identify distinct bourgeois or proletarian formations. Rather than fixed categories, classes appear as shifting, hybrid entities shaped by both indigenous institutions and the uneven intrusion of capitalist relations. Copans references works such as Majhemout Diop's *The History of Social Classes in West Africa* to support his argument, noting how empirical data is often filtered through Eurocentric assumptions, thus distorting the lived realities of African populations. For example, local figures like the marabouts in Senegal challenge traditional class schemas, as their authority derives not from capitalist accumulation but from spiritual and communal influence.

The discussion of class formation cannot be separated from the history of colonialism and anti-colonial struggle. Copans draws on the thought of Amílcar Cabral to illustrate how revolutionary movements in Africa were not merely reactions to external imperial domination, but also efforts to confront internal contradictions within African societies. Cabral's insistence on contextualizing struggle within local modes of production and forms of social organization serves as a corrective to the universalizing tendencies of classical Marxism. By highlighting the persistence of modes such as the slave-based economy and the role of ethnic hierarchies, Copans underscores the inadequacy of framing African revolution solely through the lens of anti-imperialism. Instead, he emphasizes the necessity of interrogating internal forms of exploitation and the historical specificities that shape class dynamics on the continent.

Copans further critiques the superficial understanding of capitalism in West Africa, especially in rural areas where traditional forms of social organization continue to exert considerable influence. While elements of capitalist development are evident—such as market dependence, commodification, and wage labor—the transformation has been neither uniform nor complete. Capitalism in these contexts does not produce a neat polarization between capitalists and workers; instead, it coexists with, and is often mediated by, kinship obligations, patron-client networks, and communal landholding systems. This partial and uneven development complicates the application of Marxist categories, which presume the disintegration of pre-capitalist forms and the rise of a class-conscious proletariat. The result is a set of social relations that defy simple classification and call for more flexible analytical tools.

A key argument running through Copans' work is the inappropriateness of applying Marxist concepts—developed within the specific historical conditions of 19th-century Europe—directly to African contexts. Marx and Engels, though insightful in their analysis of capitalist society, paid little attention to non-European formations, leaving a theoretical gap when it comes to understanding class outside the industrialized West. As Copans points out, Africanist scholars who adopt Marxist theory often do so without adapting its concepts to local realities. This results in a form of intellectual dependency that mirrors the very colonial relations of domination that revolutionary theory seeks to oppose. Modernization theory, for its part, fares no better; despite its interest in developmental stages, it too imposes a linear narrative of progress that flattens the historical particularities of African societies.

The postcolonial state emerges in Copans' analysis as a central site of class formation and contestation. Rather than acting as a neutral framework for capitalist development, the African state often becomes a locus of accumulation, privilege, and patronage. Political elites, whose power may be rooted in both colonial legacies and traditional networks, blur the boundaries between economic and political authority. This hybrid nature of state power undermines simplistic readings of class as either a function of capital ownership or political control. Urbanization further complicates matters by giving rise to a fragmented proletariat, much of which is employed informally and lacks the organizational coherence and political consciousness typically associated with working-class movements. Meanwhile, rural populations remain enmeshed in relations of dependency that combine elements of feudal, capitalist, and communal systems.

In response to these complexities, Copans calls for the development of an autonomous African Marxist discourse—one that moves beyond theoretical mimicry and engages directly with the continent's specific historical trajectories and socio-political configurations. This does not mean abandoning Marxism, but rather rethinking its categories and assumptions through grounded empirical research and a dialectical engagement with African realities. Such an approach requires intellectual courage and methodological innovation, as it challenges both the authority of Western theory and the inertia of inherited concepts. It also insists that theory must emerge from practice—from the lived struggles, social contradictions, and historical processes that define African societies.

Copans ends by emphasizing the importance of a reflexive and critical bibliography, one that acknowledges the interplay between theory and empirical observation. The task, he argues, is not merely to apply theory to Africa, but to refine and reconstruct it through the African experience. Only then can we begin to understand class not as a static import, but as a dynamic, historically embedded process—shaped by colonial legacies, indigenous institutions, and the uneven march of global capitalism. In doing so, Copans offers not just a critique of past scholarship, but a path forward for a truly decolonized and contextually relevant political economy of Africa.

Viewed through the lens of the conceptual framework underpinning this study, Jean Copans' intervention constitutes more than a critique—it becomes a methodological recalibration of Marxism and Dependency Theory within African International Relations (AIR). His analysis squarely aligns with the dimension of Historical Specificity, as he dismantles the universalist assumptions of classical Marxism and rejects the rigid binaries that ignore Africa's hybrid social formations, where class is shaped not only by labor and capital, but also by kinship, ethnicity, and spiritual authority. Simultaneously, Copans' work complements the Political Economy dimension by exposing how internal class contradictions—mediated through patronage, traditional authority, and informal labor systems—interact with external structures of domination that persist even after formal decolonization. Indeed, his call for a localized Marxist discourse prefigures a critique of neo-dependency arrangements, where new external actors such as China reproduce extractive relationships under the guise of South-South cooperation. This challenge to both vulgar Marxism and neo-dependency schemes advances the third dimension of the framework—Agency and Praxis—as Copans insists that African scholars and movements must produce theory from within, grounded in local struggles, histories, and institutional realities. Rather than remaining passive consumers of imported theory, Copans urges African thinkers to assert epistemic sovereignty and build a decolonized political economy from the ground up. In so doing, he repositions Africa not merely as an object of global IR, but as a generative site of critical thought and transformative praxis.

Dependency Revisited – Agency, Asymmetry, and the Role of New Powers

Robert Mason's (2017) analysis of China's influence on African international relations presents a nuanced reconsideration of dependency theory in light of evolving global dynamics. His exploration begins with a sharp focus on the economic relationship between China and African oil-exporting countries since the early 1990s, identifying a transformative moment in the continent's international relations landscape. This transformation calls into question long-held theoretical assumptions, especially those grounded in classical dependency theory, by introducing a new model of economic engagement that is simultaneously empowering and constraining. Mason's argument rests on the premise that China's economic diplomacy—while distinct from

that of former colonial and Western powers—nonetheless generates complex layers of dependence, thus complicating Africa's quest for genuine autonomy in global affairs.

Traditional dependency theory posits a binary in which underdeveloped nations remain locked in unequal economic and political relationships with dominant global powers. In the African context, this theory has been historically used to explain how resource extraction, unequal trade terms, and aid dependencies have perpetuated a cycle of underdevelopment. However, Mason challenges the uncritical application of this framework by highlighting how China's entrance into the African sphere, particularly through oil diplomacy, disrupts yet subtly reinforces this paradigm. While African countries are no longer bound solely to the West, their increasing reliance on China introduces new asymmetries that require analytical attention. Scholars like Ian Taylor contribute to this critique by warning that emerging powers such as China, under the BRICS coalition, may inadvertently (or deliberately) replicate the structures of global inequality that dependency theory originally sought to expose.

Mason's work further interrogates China's diplomatic strategies, emphasizing how African countries face limited maneuverability in diversifying their international engagements, especially given the persistent legacies of colonialism and the structural weaknesses of postcolonial states. China's expansion in Africa is marked by a strategic mix of statecraft and commerce, often operating through high-level diplomatic visits, major infrastructural investments, and extensive bilateral agreements. Yet these interactions, despite their rhetoric of mutual benefit and South-South solidarity, often reflect entrenched power imbalances. Scholars such as Timothy Shaw argue that the China-Africa dynamic exemplifies globalization's impact on state sovereignty, where non-state actors and informal economic structures complicate the neat state-to-state model of diplomacy. This interplay underscores the multidimensional nature of power in contemporary African international relations, where influence extends beyond formal political channels into economic, cultural, and social spheres.

Despite China's consistent invocation of the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence—which include mutual respect and non-interference—the structural features of its engagement with Africa remain asymmetrical. Mason notes that while African states technically retain sovereignty over their resources and policy choices, the sheer scale of Chinese investment and trade creates an uneven playing field. China's hunger for oil and other strategic commodities has led to an export-oriented relationship that mirrors earlier patterns of dependency, where African economies continue to prioritize raw material extraction at the expense of diversified development. This dynamic suggests not a clean break from dependency, but rather an evolution—what some have termed “neo-dependency”—where the identity of the dominant power changes, but the foundational imbalances persist.

Diplomatic recognition, a significant component of the China-Africa relationship, offers further insight into this reconfiguration of dependency. Mason observes that China's inclusive diplomatic posture—welcoming leaders regardless of governance standards—provides regimes with a form of international legitimacy that can sidestep Western scrutiny. This dynamic has a dual effect: on one hand, it enables African states to exercise greater agency by leveraging multiple external relationships; on the other, it creates a permissive environment where authoritarian tendencies can thrive under the cover of strategic partnership. Such arrangements complicate the normative dimensions of international relations, revealing how power is exercised not just through economic leverage but also through the strategic management of legitimacy and recognition on the global stage.

China's growing involvement in United Nations peacekeeping operations adds another layer to its evolving presence in Africa. While this engagement might signal a commitment to global norms and responsibilities, Mason warns that it can also be interpreted as a calculated effort to secure economic interests while enhancing China's international image. For instance, China's arms sales to conflict-prone states like Sudan raise serious questions about the coherence of its peacekeeping role. This tension between normative engagement and realpolitik encapsulates the ambivalence at the heart of China's African strategy—a simultaneous pursuit of ethical diplomacy and national self-interest.

Humanitarian engagement, particularly during crises such as the Ebola outbreak, reflects another facet of China's expanding footprint in Africa. Here, Mason identifies a shift toward more visible and responsive foreign policy behavior, one that positions China as a reliable global partner in times of need. Yet even this seemingly altruistic involvement is not free from strategic calculations. It serves to consolidate China's influence across humanitarian and public health fronts, thereby deepening its embeddedness in African societies and enhancing its soft power. Such moves reflect a strategic duality, where humanitarianism and geopolitical ambition coalesce in ways that challenge simplistic readings of international assistance.

Ultimately, Mason argues for a reconceptualization of Africa's international relations as a dynamic and multilayered field shaped by overlapping dependencies. African states, rather than passively succumbing to external pressures, actively navigate these global currents by shifting between various actors—including China, the West, and multilateral institutions like the IMF and World Bank. This oscillating pattern of engagement² reflects what Mason calls "emergent dependencies," where African governments both resist and reproduce dependency through their strategic alignments. For example, Angola exemplifies this duality by relying on Chinese infrastructure loans while continuing to negotiate with Western creditors to maintain financial flexibility.

In light of these developments, the emphasis on sub-regional cooperation becomes a crucial strategy for counterbalancing external pressures. Initiatives such as the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) represent collective efforts to forge internal economic strength and bargaining power. By leveraging shared histories, linguistic affinities, and regional solidarity, African states can potentially build more resilient and autonomous economic frameworks. These collaborative ventures are not only practical responses to global market fluctuations but also political statements about the continent's capacity for self-determination and strategic agency.

Mason's conclusion points to the urgency of updating dependency theory to reflect the realities of a multipolar world. The rise of China does not negate dependency; rather, it complicates it, introducing new forms and avenues through which power is exercised and contested. African states are not mere victims in this process; they are active participants capable of shaping the terms of engagement. The path forward lies not in replacing one hegemon with another, but in cultivating internal capacities, diversifying partnerships, and building institutions that prioritize long-term development over short-term gains. In this evolving landscape, the future of African international relations will depend on how successfully the continent navigates its entanglements with global powers while forging a coherent and autonomous regional vision.

Within the conceptual framework guiding this study, Robert Mason's analysis exemplifies a contemporary recalibration of Dependency Theory in line with the evolving logic of African International Relations. Mason's emphasis on China's complex role in African development resonates powerfully with the dimension of Historical Specificity, as it interrogates the shifting contours of dependency in a multipolar world rather than clinging to outdated binaries of North-South domination. His empirical attention to post-Cold War oil diplomacy, arms trade, and soft power projections like humanitarianism reveals a new kind of dependency shaped not by colonial residue alone but by dynamic geopolitical realignments and state-level strategic calculations. This approach advances the Political Economy dimension of the framework by mapping how China's infrastructure lending, extractive trade relations, and legitimization of authoritarian regimes mirror—but also evolve—earlier neo-colonial arrangements. These engagements reflect a restructured yet familiar logic of accumulation and control, where Africa's material wealth is extracted through new routes, under the rhetoric of South-South solidarity. Crucially, Mason's framework also contributes to the dimension of Agency and Praxis by reframing African states not as passive peripheries, but as oscillating agents within an emergent dependency matrix. He highlights how countries like Angola maneuver between Chinese and Western financiers, and how regional platforms like SADC and AfCFTA act as bulwarks against unilateral dependence. Still, Mason remains cautious of rhetorical agency that is unmoored from structural transformation—warning that African autonomy cannot be realized merely through diversified partnerships but must be grounded in internally-driven policy coherence and regional economic self-strengthening. Thus, while Mason updates

² Shifting patterns of economic and political reliance by African states between old colonial powers and new global actors like China or the Gulf States.

Dependency Theory to account for China's presence, he also critiques African complicity in sustaining asymmetrical ties, urging a praxis-oriented recalibration of strategy, vision, and institutional capacity. In doing so, Mason's work reinserts AIR into the heart of global IR debates—not as a peripheral echo, but as a critical theatre where new dependency logics and emancipatory possibilities are simultaneously forged.

DISCUSSIONS: PATHWAYS TO RETHINKING AFRICAN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

The study of African International Relations (AIR) necessitates a fundamental reorientation away from Eurocentric paradigms and reductive theoretical transplants. It calls instead for a conceptual framework grounded in historical particularism, relational class analysis, and a reworked dependency theory that captures Africa's dynamic yet constrained engagement with global structures. These three interlinked pillars offer a critical lens through which to interrogate Africa's marginal position in the international system without dismissing the region's agency, hybridity, and internal heterogeneities.

The first pillar—historical particularism—foregrounds Africa's distinct entry into global capitalism through conquest, coercion, and structural distortion. Kwesi Botchwey (1977) critiques the deterministic bent of vulgar Marxism that presumes a universal trajectory of socio-economic development. In contrast, his insistence on Africa's historical specificities demands that scholars rethink AIR not as a derivative of European state formation but as a reflection of interrupted and hybrid historical processes. For instance, the persistence of communal land tenure systems in Ghana and kin-based economies in northern Uganda illustrate non-capitalist modes of production coexisting within a global capitalist system.

This approach invites a reanalysis of contemporary international engagements, such as the extraction economies in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), where Western and Chinese multinationals exploit coltan and cobalt with minimal local benefit (Nest, 2011). Such extractive dynamics are not merely economic transactions; they are embedded in colonial legacies and perpetuated through neoliberal governance models promoted by international financial institutions (IFIs), including the IMF and World Bank. These institutions often prescribe reforms that fail to account for localized political economies, such as the informal cross-border trade networks in East Africa or Nigeria's dual economy, thus further distorting domestic policy space.

The second pillar—relational class analysis—builds on Jean Copans' (1985) rejection of the uncritical transplantation of Western class schemas into African contexts. Copans' work underscores how colonial capitalism engendered unique class formations, where the postcolonial state emerged not as a neutral arbiter but as an intermediary apparatus facilitating capital accumulation for both domestic elites and foreign interests. In this conception, the African state is neither wholly autonomous nor entirely dependent; it is a bargaining arena, mediating global and local interests through elite coalitions.

For example, in Côte d'Ivoire, French agribusiness alliances with domestic elites in the cocoa industry (Woods, 2003), and Senegal's groundnut export economy, exemplify how international economic relations are embedded in domestic class politics. The same pattern is evident in Angola, where post-war MPLA elites secured infrastructure deals through Chinese resource-backed loans, sidelining accountability and perpetuating inequalities (Soares de Oliveira, 2015). Ethiopia's industrial parks, largely financed by China and Turkey, followed a similar logic of state-led growth but without empowering labor—a key omission from classical Marxist analysis (Gebresenbet, 2020). These examples illustrate the need for AIR to move beyond methodological statism and integrate class contradictions, informal economies, and elite brokerage as explanatory variables.

The third pillar—a revised dependency theory—revitalizes the insights of thinkers like Samir Amin (1980) and Dos Santos (1970), while incorporating Robert Mason's (2017) idea of "oscillating dependencies." This perspective acknowledges that dependency is no longer confined to North-South axes but is reproduced through South-South engagements and neoliberal globalization. For instance, Zambia's copper-for-loans arrangements with China and the leasing of Kenneth Kaunda International Airport point to new forms of strategic indebtedness (Carmody, 2011). Ghana's bauxite-for-infrastructure deals with Sinohydro mirror

colonial barter systems that exchanged raw materials for superficial infrastructure without catalyzing structural transformation (Bräutigam & Gallagher, 2014).

Despite these patterns, agency remains possible. Countries such as Rwanda and Mauritius have strategically navigated multi-vector foreign policies, balancing Chinese, Western, and Indian partnerships to support their development agendas (Taylor, 2016). Ethiopia's model of developmental statism—though flawed in its repression of dissent—demonstrates a selective and strategic appropriation of external resources under national control. However, such examples remain exceptions. In Mozambique, Chad, and Sierra Leone, foreign investment has merely entrenched extractive enclaves, worsened environmental degradation, and deepened economic vulnerability. This persistent structural asymmetry is also evident in Sub-Saharan Africa's position within global value chains. From Kenya's floriculture industry to Lesotho's textile sector, African economies are tied to low-value production that reinforces their dependency on foreign markets and firms (Kaplinsky & Morris, 2001). Even South Africa's mining sector, despite its relative industrialization, remains externally oriented and vulnerable to global commodity fluctuations.

Samir Amin's (1980) concept of "delinking" from exploitative global structures finds partial expression in African regional integration efforts. Initiatives like the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), ECOWAS, and COMESA represent strategic attempts to reconfigure intra-African economic relations. Yet, as Onyia (2020), Oyebamiji (2024), and Ogbodo (2024) caution, these efforts are often constrained by fragmented infrastructure, political rivalries, and weak productive capacities.

Projects like the Southern African Power Pool (SAPP) and LAPSET corridor showcase the potential of endogenous development strategies but also reveal the vulnerabilities of African regionalism when entangled with external financing and elite capture (Kilaka, 2022; Otiato, 2020; Wissenbach & Wang, 2017). Chinese-funded infrastructure across East Africa, for instance, has facilitated regional connectivity but often under opaque terms that reproduce dependency under new guises (Whang, 2018; Otele & Guguyu, 2023). Hence, while Mason (2017) rightly calls for a recalibrated dependency theory that reflects African agency, his analysis also reinforces the enduring structural asymmetries that limit meaningful transformation. Dependency has not disappeared—it has mutated.

CONCLUSION: TOWARD A PLURAL AND EMANCIPATORY FRAMEWORK FOR AFRICAN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

Reconceptualizing African International Relations (AIR) requires more than intellectual revision—it necessitates a structural and epistemic overhaul grounded in the continent's lived experiences, historical trajectories, and material conditions. This study advances a plural and emancipatory AIR framework by integrating African-centered rearticulations of Marxism and Dependency Theory, as conceptualized through the interwoven dimensions of Historical Specificity, Political Economy, and Agency and Praxis. The works of Botchwey (1977), Copans (1985), and Mason (2017) are not merely theoretical footnotes but foundational to this rethinking, providing pathways for an AIR that centers Africa as both object and subject of global analysis.

Mainstream IR theories often assume a linear progression toward modernity, state consolidation, and economic development—an assumption at odds with the African experience. The historical specificities of Africa's state formation, notably shaped by colonial violence, artificial borders, and the simultaneous dismantling and reproduction of precolonial social structures, must anchor any serious AIR framework. As Rodney (1972) powerfully argued, Africa's integration into the capitalist world system was not a neutral exchange but a process of deliberate underdevelopment. For instance, the legacy of indirect rule in Nigeria and Kenya established fragmented political authority that continues to shape elite competition and regional power struggles today (Mamdani, 1996). Similarly, the structural adjustment programs (SAPs) imposed by the IMF and World Bank in the 1980s did not merely liberalize economies—they rewired the postcolonial state to prioritize external debt servicing over domestic welfare, as evidenced by the dramatic collapse of public healthcare in Zambia and Tanzania during that period (Mkandawire & Soludo, 1999). Recognizing these ruptures challenges IR's prescriptive universalisms and instead foregrounds the historically contingent nature of African engagement with the international system.

The reinterpreted dependency logic embedded in the framework asserts that African states exist at the nexus of internal class contradictions and external imperialist pressures. Copans (1985) underscores that the class structures in postcolonial Africa cannot be understood through orthodox Marxist categories. The African bourgeoisie—often referred to as the “comprador elite”—has historically acted as intermediaries between global capital and domestic labor, often reinforcing underdevelopment rather than resisting it. Empirical evidence from Ghana’s cocoa economy illustrates this tension. The state’s initial nationalist control over production and pricing under Nkrumah was later eroded under SAPs, with transnational firms such as Cargill and Archer Daniels Midland reasserting control over pricing mechanisms and export routes (Whitfield, 2012). The outcome was a reconfiguration of dependency—less direct colonial control, more structural subordination through market liberalization. Likewise, Mason’s (2017) analysis of BRICS-Africa relations shows how countries like China replicate extractive trade patterns by importing raw materials and exporting manufactured goods, reinforcing Africa’s position in the global division of labor despite the rhetoric of “South-South solidarity.”

Domestically, these dynamics manifest in hybrid governance regimes. For example, in Uganda, Museveni’s developmental rhetoric coexists with increasing authoritarianism, militarized patronage networks, and land grabs facilitated by foreign direct investment (Datzberger, 2018). Such cases highlight that AIR must incorporate both the internal architecture of elite accumulation and the external mechanisms of financial and trade dependency to grasp the full political economy of African global engagement. While dependency and structural subordination persist, African states and actors are not devoid of agency. However, this agency must be conceptualized not simply as reactive maneuvering within pre-set global rules, but as praxis—an ideologically grounded and strategically conscious effort to reshape those rules. This framework echoes Fanon’s (1961) call for a decolonial reassertion of self-determination and Botchwey’s (1977) insistence on structural transformation rather than reformist accommodation.

In recent years, empirical instances of such agency are visible in regional diplomacy and pan-African initiatives. The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), for example, represents an ambitious effort to shift intra-African trade patterns, reduce reliance on former colonial metropolises, and consolidate bargaining power in global negotiations (UNECA, 2021). Though implementation remains uneven, it signals a praxis-oriented reconfiguration of AIR. Another example is the coordinated response to COVID-19 through the African Union’s African Vaccine Acquisition Task Team (AVATT), which negotiated collectively with vaccine suppliers—an act of continental agency in a context of global vaccine apartheid (Achille & Mbembe, 2021).

Moreover, intellectual agency is equally vital. African scholars, think tanks, and civil society organizations are increasingly producing theory from within—challenging IR’s epistemological gatekeeping. Initiatives like the CODESRIA platform and works by scholars such as Adebajo (2020) and Zondi (2018) continue to build an alternative IR canon that is grounded in African realities and global aspirations.

The plural and emancipatory AIR framework advanced here is not a closed system, but a dynamic and reflexive space for theorizing Africa’s place in the world. Its strength lies in its anchoring in historical specificity, its rigorous attention to both internal and external political economies, and its commitment to transformative agency and praxis. It rejects the false binary of Afro-pessimism and Afro-optimism and instead affirms a practical realism—one that recognizes structural constraints while asserting the possibility of systemic change. The challenge for future AIR scholarship is to continue theorizing from within—to craft analyses and policy approaches that are attentive to local histories, critical of global hierarchies, and resolutely committed to justice and sovereignty. In this sense, Africa is not merely a site of international relations—it is a generator of international theory. And it is from that foundation that a truly decolonized and emancipatory global order may begin to emerge.

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Author Contribution

OAK conceived, researched, wrote, revised and submitted the article.

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