

## Commentary

# To Be or Not to Be (Human): A Question of Economic Theories

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**This study explores how economic theories, particularly CEPAL structuralism, intersect with Lou Andreas-Salomé’s reflections on the human condition and chronic dissatisfaction. Moving beyond the reductionist figure of homo economicus, it examines how socio-economic and cultural structures shape both historical inequality and the subjective experience of incompleteness. The analysis argues that the relationship between objective structures and individual existence is marked by tensions and constraints, but also by creative and transformative potential. In this way, the study seeks to connect economic and existential dimensions in order to reflect on the paradox of human beings who, while objectifying themselves, endlessly pursue wholeness.**

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## 1. Introduction

Over the years, the political dimension of political economy, perhaps even its human dimension, has been gradually dissolved within more traditional economic approaches. Humanity as a whole has been reduced to a single point: that of equilibrium, which in many approaches is even considered static. Such staticity is operationalized through *ceteris paribus* in economic models that assume a constancy diverging from the natural inconstancy of the human being, a being that is, transforms, and is continuously transformed.

In this cave of isolation dwells homo economicus: rational beings who, in daily reality, often cannot even rationalize the true source of their constant dissatisfaction nor the strategies they use to cope with this feeling toward themselves and the world. Thus, through economic mainstream, the human being objectifies itself, seeking to optimally fill itself with things. Objectified people are induced to fulfill

themselves through things, thereby often becoming objects of the very things they consume. The homo economicus assumes the role of rationalizer of its own objectification. In such approaches, the human being rationally chooses, and only rationally, to exist in order to objectify itself.

However, if the fulfillment of our satisfaction occurs through the acquisition of products (the things of the economy!), why are we always dissatisfied? What is the relationship between chronic human dissatisfaction and socio-economic structures?

In seeking to foster discussions in this direction, the present essay highlights human and structural aspects addressed in some writings of Lou Andreas-Salomé and in the works of authors related to CEPAL structuralism. The purpose of this study is not to formulate universal laws or causal explanations, but to create a conceptual framework that brings structural inequality into conversation with Salomé's theory.

## 2. Methodology

This study is built on a critical reading of two distinct references: Latin American economic structuralism, especially in CEPAL's formulations, and Lou Andreas-Salomé's reflections on the human condition. The dialogue between these perspectives is developed through comparative interpretation, highlighting points of convergence, tension, and complementarity between socio-economic structures and subjective experiences of incompleteness. NVivo software was used to code Salomé's text. The publications on Latin American economic structuralism, as well as Salomé's writings, were selected for their relevance to the literature. This selection was guided by the indication of five experts from both fields, who identified the texts considered most significant for the analysis.

## 3. Results

### 3.1. Socioeconomic Structuralism – CEPAL

According to Furtado<sup>[1]</sup>, the study of economics should concentrate on the multidimensional characterization of different socio-economic structures, since these condition the process of diffusion and the effectiveness, in space and time, of actors' decisions. Therefore, the ability to propagate different aspects of diffusion and feedback (endogenous and exogenous) in economic processes depends on the existing structure<sup>[2]</sup>, which, in turn, is the result of the social, economic, political, and cultural processes inherent to each locality. Such structures would generate asymmetric levels of development both at the (inter) national and subnational level, as propulsive effects would not consistently feed themselves in

structurally weaker areas. Thus, “the size, the dimension of a national economy, and, likewise, inequality among nations, cannot be properly analyzed without focusing on the structural characteristics (...)”<sup>[3]</sup>.

Another important aspect is that the structuralist approach does not consider that there is a tendency of the socio-economic system toward a general equilibrium. Myrdal<sup>[2]</sup> points out that the mistake of applying the hypothesis of stable equilibrium to socio-economic reality lies in the very idea that the process tends toward a position that can be described as a state of balance among forces. Thus, underdevelopment does not represent a stage of development nor a lower degree of it, but rather an autonomous historical process of development<sup>[1]</sup>, thereby rejecting the applicability of the idea of uniform stages of development<sup>[4]</sup>.

According to Volpi<sup>[5]</sup>, the history of colonization in the American continent was the “root” of the current level of asymmetry between developed countries and the so-called backward ones in Latin America. He highlights the main aspects of this process as being related to “the social origins of the colonizers, the forms of distribution and ownership of land that they introduced, the modalities of organization and mobilization of the labor force”<sup>[5]</sup>. Land distribution and ownership, along with the institutions established in the early stages of colonization, reproduced the European feudal model. However, this configuration was soon overcome in English and French colonies, while in Spanish and Portuguese territories it persisted. In the latter, servile labor predominated, while in English and French colonies free labor was more common. Moreover, colonization in Latin America led to the creation of large estates (latifundios), while in the United States and Canada, the emerging structure was based on small and medium landholdings, which gradually stimulated the development of those territories.

For Latin American reformist theories of the 1960s, including CEPAL's, the issue of land distribution implied social transformation in three dimensions: breaking traditional political power (democratization), redistributing wealth and income (social justice), and expanding domestic markets (industrialization)<sup>[6]</sup>. Oliveira<sup>[7]</sup> adds that “land reform could eliminate both the source of the urban reserve army and patrimonialist power.”

However, public policies in Latin America were largely based on a reductionist vision of the process, focusing only on agrarian modernization and thus promoting elite interests, rather than broader political, social, and economic restructuring. As a result, the lack of significant agrarian reform in the region turned its history into “a history of lost opportunities”<sup>[8]</sup>.

Beyond economic aspects, the unequal distribution of land correlates negatively with the level of territorial growth<sup>[9]</sup> and therefore directly affects development, as it constrains people's freedom<sup>[10]</sup>. Thus, the true purpose of agrarian reform would not only be to enable farmers to become more dynamic actors in the economic sphere but also to have a strong socio-political impact<sup>[11]</sup>.

Disparities between developed and “backward” countries intensified during the Industrial Revolution, when global productive structures were reconfigured in two distinct ways: (1) massive adaptation of pre-existing structures to the new capitalist mode of production, or (2) the creation of a dualist structure in which old and new models coexisted<sup>[12][13][14]</sup>.

According to Furtado<sup>[11][14]</sup>, the first path occurred in Western Europe and some English ex-colonies such as Australia, Canada, and the United States. This was possible through the strengthening of productivity levels of the factors of production (labor, capital, land, and technology), which allowed the gradual adaptation of existing structures. Productivity growth, capital accumulation, and technological progress reinforced one another in this process of economic growth.

The second path (dualist form) implied the coexistence of capitalist and pre-capitalist modes of production. The latter, however, did not contribute significantly to internal demand, food supply, or skilled labor. Structural duality, Furtado<sup>[1]</sup> argued, was one of the main causes of socio-economic disparities between developed and underdeveloped countries, since the antagonistic structures present in underdeveloped nations hindered their development. Furthermore, the “modern” sector in such economies was fragile, relying heavily on primary exports.

Latin America's insertion into the international division of labor during the Industrial Revolution occurred mainly through primary exports (Coronel, 2012). This insertion could be divided into two types: exporters of temperate-zone agricultural goods and exporters of tropical products<sup>[15][14]</sup>.

In temperate-climate countries such as Argentina and Uruguay, extensive land use supported agriculture, stimulating transportation systems that unified domestic markets. Fertile soil allowed high profitability<sup>[1]</sup>, while competition with rapidly industrializing countries spurred the adoption of new technologies, leading to substantial technological progress and growth.

In contrast, tropical producers like Brazil failed to link their agricultural production to domestic market development. Low prices of tropical goods, influenced by low wages in competing colonies, limited local development. This type of production did not encourage infrastructure creation or innovation, leading to technological stagnation and reinforcing large estates<sup>[1]</sup>.

Paraguay's development path was exceptional. After independence, the country pursued both political and economic independence, avoiding the neocolonial dynamics of free trade<sup>[16]</sup>. However, the War of the Triple Alliance (1864–1870) devastated the nation, killing nearly 70% of its population<sup>[17]</sup> and leaving the country bankrupt and subordinated to foreign capital<sup>[16]</sup>.

Latin America's export structures, together with deteriorating terms of trade between primary and manufactured goods<sup>[18][19][20]</sup>, restricted diversification and capital accumulation. Studies by Ocampo & Parra<sup>[21]</sup> show that while deterioration may not be continuous, the 20th century saw undeniable declines. Ricardo's theory, therefore, appeared incoherent when applied to Latin American contexts<sup>[22]</sup>.

Excessive price volatility of primary goods further harmed development. Williamson<sup>[23]</sup> and Carneiro<sup>[24]</sup> argue that this volatility negatively affected fiscal revenues, public expenditure stability, and long-term investment capacity. At the same time, much of Latin America's trade surplus was consumed by elite imports of luxury goods rather than reinvested domestically<sup>[25][5]</sup>.

This redirection of capital reduced the capacity for technological innovation and production chain development. Low wages prevented the creation of mass domestic markets<sup>[5]</sup>. Murphy, Shleifer & Vishny<sup>[26]</sup> argued that sustainable industrialization requires redistributing agricultural and export incomes to expand domestic demand, rejecting Kuznets's inverted U hypothesis and instead supporting the idea that more equal distribution favors growth even at early stages<sup>[9]</sup>.

Prebisch<sup>[27]</sup> and Hirschman<sup>[28]</sup> highlighted the industrial sector's central role in fostering development due to its backward and forward linkages. However, Latin American industrialization often emerged as structurally disconnected, relying on imported semi-finished products instead of transforming domestic raw materials, limiting capital accumulation<sup>[28]</sup>. Perroux<sup>[3]</sup> emphasized the heterogeneity and disconnection of underdeveloped economies, which eliminated many of the positive spillovers from leading industries.

According to Furtado<sup>[29]</sup>, Latin American structuralism sought to analyze social reality also through the resistances posed by structural elements to transformation, including the relationship between economic and political spheres. It thus approached a dialectical view of social becoming, opposing neoclassical functionalism and ahistorical perspectives.

By 2010, CEPAL acknowledged that social convergence required institutional capacity to reduce social gaps sustainably with citizen support. Yet, as CEPAL<sup>[30]</sup> warned, such agreements often rely on elite

interests rather than broad consensus. Similarly, the UNDP<sup>[31]</sup> noted “in the end unequal societies – democratic or not – are societies where power is more concentrated in the hands of elites, so it is not surprising that economic and political institutions work in their favour. A study of attitudes towards education among Brazilian elites during the 1990s found that elites were often reluctant to broaden education opportunities on the grounds that educated workers would be more difficult to manage. Government policy-makers worried that a more expensive labour force would reduce the country’s comparative advantage in labour-intensive goods. Such thinking impedes human development (...).

Thus, socio-economic structures historically shaped inequality and dissatisfaction. Old CEPAL structuralism saw them as fundamental in shaping human conditions and limits. These contradictions reveal a human being striving for more human existence, resembling a lunar eclipse — with equilibrium seen only as a half-moon. Yet deeper questions remain about why we persist in constant dissatisfaction.

### *3.2. Lou Andreas-Salomé and Dissatisfaction*

According to Salomé, the interaction of human beings with the world can be represented through categories ranging from the “homogeneous, empathic, and familiar to what is strange, unusual, and hostile”<sup>[32]</sup>. In this context, strong individuality emerges when the human being is, for any reason, led to “harden, closing in on itself, opposing the outside world through refusal, aggression, and threat (...). Conversely, what we call self-forgetting (...) sees and feels in every creature, however distant, the great unity of all things”<sup>[32]</sup>. Not only intermediate options but even these two poles are based on the same desire: “to possess totality in the life that surrounds it, to enter it, to be filled by it”<sup>[32]</sup>. Some dizzying questions that arise from this are: how, and with what, can we be fulfilled?

According to Alves<sup>[33]</sup>, in Sartre’s first philosophical work (*The Transcendence of the Ego*), the author sought to demonstrate that “consciousness does not have an egological structure, that an Ego does not dwell within it”<sup>[33]</sup>, and that affirming consciousness as ego derives from the “vertigo of an excessive, unbearable freedom, and consequently as an inauthentic form of consummation of its relation to itself”<sup>[33]</sup>.

Like CEPAL structuralism, Lou Salomé considered historically determined conditioning structures, since they also influence the process of diffusion and the effectiveness, in space and time, of actors’ decisions. In her writings, Salomé highlights the importance of culture, transmitted for instance through the family, as a central aspect in shaping structures that influence and are influenced by human beings.

“The feeling of being bound by fraternal ties to men was for me, being the youngest and only daughter in the family circle, so self-evident that it continuously radiated to all men in the world; at all times it seemed to me that a brother was hidden in every man I met (...). But it is necessary to add here my gratitude to my parents: their loyalty, their love, the entire atmosphere surrounding them, was what developed in me a trusting nature.”<sup>[34]</sup>

Concerning Rainer, “his identification with all that is failed and rejected appeared to him so absolute in feeling as probably happens only in the creator’s impotence to create — that is, with the force of an act of creation (...). While Rainer learned to be active, devoted to things and disregarding his sentimental states of the moment, his daily life, patiently occupied by craft, by technical work, ended up submitting itself to the exclusive command of art (...). Yet it cannot be denied that this subsidy of imaginative freedom brought him even closer to a dangerous point: including himself, in moments of disappointment and self-depreciation, in such a revenge of the object.”<sup>[34]</sup>

Salomé<sup>[34]</sup> also adds, regarding Rainer. “because of this circumstance, he sought early on a vain salvation, supposing he was as he was, predetermined ‘before birth,’ forever marked with all the defects that, despite his violent disgust, often returned mercilessly to disturb him. This specifically had to do with his mother. The most violent words for this torment of almost his entire life he placed in a letter of April 15, 1904, after one of his increasingly rare encounters with her. In the middle of the letter addressed to me, he writes: My mother came to Rome and is still here. I see her rarely, but you know, every encounter with her is a kind of relapse. When I have to see this woman, lost, unreal, who relates to nothing, who cannot age, I realize how, since childhood, I have struggled to distance myself from her, and I fear inwardly that, with all these years of comings and goings, I have not freed myself enough, that I still keep inside movements that are the other half of her withered gestures, fragments of memories that, shattered, she carries with her; then I feel horror at her scattered religiosity, her stubborn faith, all these distortions and corruptions to which she has clung, herself as empty as a garment, ghostly and frightening. And yet to say that I am her son; and that through this washed-out wall, belonging to nothing, a false door, almost indistinct, was my entrance into the world (if such an entrance could truly lead to the world)!”

On interaction with the physical and cultural context, Salomé<sup>[34]</sup> observes “although we had not started with Tula, to see Tolstoy, his figure constituted, in a certain way, for us, the gateway to Russia. Because if earlier it had been Dostoevsky who revealed to Rainer the depths of the human soul among Russians, it was Tolstoy who, for him, embodied the Russian man himself, due to the poetic penetration in all his

descriptions. This second visit to Tolstoy in May 1900 did not take place, as in the first journey, in his winter house in Moscow, but in his estate Yasnaya Polyana, located seventeen versts from Tula.”

Although Salomé does not explicitly use the terms circular causality and dialectic in her approach, it is possible to recognize their presence in many passages analyzed, particularly regarding family and social interactions and the structures inherent to individuals. According to Salomé, these structures are fundamental in determining how human beings act in their search for wholeness. At this point, she seems to indicate a kind of “pseudo-structural ruler” capable of helping us measure what is homogeneous/empathic/familiar versus what is strange/unusual/hostile. To this complexity one may add the socio-economic inequalities highlighted by CEPAL structuralism.

In this regard, Salomé notes that “it is often observed that the almost religious attraction with which Bolshevism seized the Russian proletariat, superimposing, so to speak, Lenin’s myth on Christ’s tradition, was a clever and intentional exploitation of this people’s pious faith; however, although this may often have happened, such an explanation is no more enlightening than attributing religion to the cunning and ambition of priests. It is undoubtedly the result of colossal experiments that, through their irresistible terror, their boundless audacity, shook Russia in all directions. Abstracting from the question of the future, whether there will be failure or triumph, they are linked to the religious fervor of the Russian man, because it has been precisely this man who has confronted the materialism of political theories and the machinery of astonishing technique, a terrain that appeared to him completely different, for his soul was steeped in faith. It could not be so where those theories were conceived, or, rather, it could not be so in civilizations that evolved at a more normal and slower pace.”<sup>[34]</sup>

According to Salomé<sup>[34][32]</sup>, idealizations, whether religious, political, or romantic, stem from the same source: the human need, often unconscious, to transcend the sense of incompleteness that characterizes the individual. These idealizations accompany human beings throughout life. In childhood, they manifest as superheroes; later, through gods, political figures, or “god-like loves.” Yet none of these manifestations can permanently transcend the feeling of incompleteness, which often leads to disillusionment. In this dynamic, human beings often objectify the other. Thus, not only are we compelled to deal with our own incompleteness and the illusions and disillusionments it produces, but also with the incompleteness, idealizations, and frustrations of others who, in some cases, may place us on a pedestal.

As a counterpoint to irrational wills, Schopenhauer<sup>[35]</sup> suggests that “each one knows his own will only in its successive isolated acts, not as a whole, in and for itself: hence precisely no one knows a priori his



own character, but only becomes familiar with it through experience, and always imperfectly. Nevertheless, the perception in which we know the stirrings and acts of our own will is by far the most immediate of all: it is the point at which the thing-in-itself breaks most immediately into appearance and is closely illuminated by the knowing subject; this is why this intimately known process is the only one fit to become the exegete of any other.”

According to Salomé, nothing could completely fulfill human beings. The feeling of incompleteness accompanies us from birth to death, for we carry the lack of the completeness experienced in the mother’s womb. The body, in its physiological dimension, retains the memory of this experience and repeatedly seeks to recover it:

“Our first experience is, remarkably, a disappearance. Moments before, we were an indivisible whole, the whole being was inseparable from us; then we are forced to be born, we become a small fragment that from then on must strive not to suffer further reductions, to assert itself before the extremely vast hostile world into which — having left our plenitude — we fall, now stripped, as if into a void. Thus, one experiences first something already past, a rejection of the present; the first ‘memory’ — shall we call it that later? — is, at the same time, a shock, a disappointment at the loss of what no longer is, and something of a knowledge that develops, of a certainty that still must be.”<sup>[32]</sup>

Therefore, are we in a context in which internal and external structures influence one another in pursuit of the unattainable? Salomé indicates that the drive arising from this search for completeness can be powerful and creative enough to transform reality, both ours and the world’s. The potentialization of these drives would occur with the reduction of the objectification of the other — and of ourselves — enabling us to exist in greater fullness of power, transformation, and reality.

## 4. Discussion

The persistence of dissatisfaction cannot be reduced to a lack of goods or to the limits of rational choice. CEPAL’s structuralist perspective makes clear that inequality and dependency are not incidental, but the result of historical patterns that concentrate opportunities and wealth while excluding vast portions of society. These enduring structures not only shape economic outcomes but also leave deep marks on how individuals imagine their own possibilities.

Lou Andreas-Salomé brings another layer to this discussion. For her, dissatisfaction is not simply a product of scarcity but a condition of existence. Human beings carry with them a sense of

incompleteness that no social arrangement or material acquisition can entirely resolve. Idealizations — whether political, religious, or personal — appear as attempts to bridge this lack, yet they never quite succeed. In this sense, her insights mirror the structuralist view: just as institutions place limits on collective development, inner structures of subjectivity constrain personal fulfillment.

Placed side by side, these approaches suggest that the question of development cannot be confined either to material conditions or to individual psychology. Both dimensions are intertwined. Ignoring one in favor of the other leads either to an economics that treats people as objects of production and consumption, or to a philosophy that overlooks the heavy weight of history.

The paradox, then, is this: to be human in the economic sphere is to seek balance in an unbalanced world, to pursue wholeness in a life that is necessarily incomplete. Acknowledging this paradox does not make it disappear, but it does shift the way we approach it. It invites us to imagine an economics less attached to abstractions of equilibrium and more responsive to human experience — an economics that sees people not as *homo economicus*, but as subjects capable of reshaping both their circumstances and themselves.

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