

Samir Amin, the man, the mind

Samir Amin's passing has justifiably elicited an extraordinarily wide range of merited tribute. **African Agenda** brings to its readers edited excerpts of some of these reflections on the life, commitments and key ideas of this revolutionary thinker.

Horace G Campbell on Samir

Born in Egypt on 3 September 1931, Amin brought to the world insights from the struggles of this society where the devastating consequences of integration into the capitalist system had brought poverty and misery for millions.

The spread of capitalism as a global system and its forcible imposition on pre-capitalist societies like Egypt has wrought underdevelopment and subjection. Their integration within global capitalism also summed up the experiences of "underdevelopment and dependence in black Africa". Samir Amin made original contributions with his three colonial typologies in Africa: the Africa of the colonial trade economy, the Africa of mining concessions and the Africa of labour reserves. "In all three cases, the colonial system organized the society so that it produced exports on the best possible terms from the viewpoint of the mother country but provided very low and stagnating returns for labour. There are no longer traditional societies in Africa, only dependent peripheral [capitalist] societies."

However, "development strategies implemented in Africa since independence have neither aimed at achieving the priority task of an agricultural revolution, nor really aimed at any significant industrialisation, but basically extended the colonial pattern of integration in the world capitalist system."

But the danger lies in capitalism itself. As Amin put it in, "The principle of endless accumulation that defines capitalism is synonymous with exponential growth and the latter, like cancer, leads to death."

The globalization of the most profitable forms and the prevailing logics of capitalism would entail the destruction of entire societies. For example, in agriculture: "Twenty million efficient pro-

ducers on one side and five billion excluded on the other the logic which governs the system is no longer able to assure the simple survival of half of humanity. Capitalism has become barbaric, directly calling for genocide. It is now more necessary than ever to substitute for it other logics of development with a superior rationality".

Born to an Egyptian father and a French mother, Amin had been a student in Paris (1947–57) and party to a moment of great intellectual ferment. Humanity was seeking to understand the ideas and economic conditions that had ushered in fascism and war, and the forces of decolonisation had seized the political and intellectual initiative after 1945. Yet in Western Europe Samir Amin witnessed the betrayal of the Algerian struggles by the French Communist Party and how the narrow chauvinism of sections of the communist movement prevented them from grasping the real liberatory content of Marxism.

From his break with the French Communist Party and Soviet Marxism, Samir Amin set out to critique mechanistic linear conceptions of development, and to address the struggles for liberation and development in Africa. Linear conceptions of "progress" and "development" have been the fixation of mainstream development economists since Walt Rostow.

Going beyond such "nonsensical development", Samir Amin linked the theory and practice of human emancipation in ways that expose the limitations of Eurocentric conception of human liberation. His powerful text, *Eurocentrism: Modernity, Religion, and Democracy: A Critique of Eurocentrism and Culturalism* rejected not only the Eurocentric view of world history but provided new and refreshing understandings of different phases and pluralities of social transformations.

Samir Amin had returned to Egypt at the height of the populism of Abdel Nasser (a year after the Suez Crisis) when the convergence of Pan-Africanism and Pan-Arabism offered radical possibilities for the peoples of Africa and the Middle East in laying foundations for real independence and worked from 1957 to 1960 as a research officer in the bureaucracy in Egypt.

Amin also embarked on collaboration with intellectuals such as Norman Girvan from the Caribbean and working through United Nations agencies such as UNCTAD, Third World radicals seized the international initiative enabling leaders such as Michael Manley, Julius Nyerere and Fidel Castro to call for a new international economic order.

But Samir Amin had also come to grasp the limitations of official populist nationalism and began to work more with popular forces. After a stint in Mali he moved to Dakar, Senegal, from where he has been associated with the intellectual and political work of progressive African causes for over 40 years, placing himself at the centre of African intellectual ferment and in service of a wider humanity.

Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan's mantra that there was no alternative to capitalism was a direct response to the radicalism enveloping the world and inspiring national liberation movements. The catastrophic results of the Thatcher and Reagan counter-revolution are now obvious. Western inspired policies of so-called 'readjustment', through IMF/World Bank recipes, to the new conditions and the global crisis created have only worsened the case.

"Another development, fundamentally based on a popular alliance, is the only acceptable alternative. The priority target of achieving the agricultural revolution clearly calls for industrialisation, but a pattern of industrialisation quite

different from the conventional one... This national and popular content of development, in its turn, is virtually inconceivable without significant change toward democratisation of the society, allowing for an autonomous expression of the various social forces and creating the basis for a real civil society. Simultaneously, the weakness of African states, referred to here, calls for co-operation and unity without which any national and popular attempt would remain extremely limited and vulnerable.”

Samir Amin remained insistent about new opportunities for continuous democratic political mobilisation of the popular classes and the reconstruction of new fronts of the oppressed peoples of the world and continued to the last his commitment to strengthening effective forms of popular power and the ideas that could give coherence to it.

Samir Amin...and the Importance of “Delinking” By John S. Saul

In honour of Samir’s memory, I discuss the concept of ‘delinking’, a concept central to Amin’s work

The increased globalization of the capitalist economy cannot somehow be downplayed by advocates of a socialist alternative. The ‘free’ global market is a major point of reference for efforts by global capital (like the World Bank and the IMF) to enforce its writ, by force and/or by seduction of Southern elites. [For the latter,] the sheer weight and lure of the global market-place also has its seductions as an apparent source of quick and relatively easy profits and of the inflow of ‘foreign capital’ – albeit capital most often pegged to the production and overseas sale of mineral and other resources and to such limited additional economic activity as meets the needs of elites. How do we go about weighing the attendant costs and benefits of such links in a progressive national developmental balance-sheet?

And how best to conceive the new and essential kinds of democratic controls over such linkages that must be established? For only with some such controls in place could countries of the

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Global South expect to be beneficiaries rather than victims of global embrace. With the market left unchecked, there can be no equal exchange between rich and poor; only the upward redistribution of resources from poor to rich.

It is precisely here that Samir Amin helped point a way forward, advocating an ever more radical decolonization from central capitalist control, through (to cite his dramatic formulation) an actual and active ‘delinking’ of the economies of the Global South from the Empire of Capital.

Delinking meant ‘the submission of external relations [to internal requirements], the opposite of the internal adjustment of the peripheries to the demands of the polarizing worldwide expansion of capital’ and it is ‘the only re-

alistic alternative’ since reform of present world capitalism or “catch up” within its framework is utopian impossibility.

Yet Amin also recognized there is no realistic haven of ‘autarky’ and no way of avoiding some involvement in the broader market (though as opportunity, not as seduction). Nonetheless, the substitution of the present political economy of recolonization with an alternative that tilts effectively towards ‘delinking’ remains fundamentally necessary.

What would the strategic programme premised on such a radical tilt look like? The answer could only begin to be found in a new project of genuine socialist planning – established on a national or regional scale – that sought to smash, precisely, the present crippling logic of ‘market limitations’ upon development.

Thus, the need for a programme that embodies ‘progressive convergence of the demand structure of the community and the needs of the population’ – the very reverse of the market fundamentalist’s global orthodoxy. Such a ‘socialism of expanded reproduction’ would refuse the Stalinist trap of ‘violently repressing mass consumption’ in the name of the supposed requirements of accumulation. From accumulation and mass consumption being warring opposites, accumulation could be driven forward precisely by finding outlets for production in meeting the growing requirements and needs of the mass of the population!

An effective industrialization strategy would thus be based on ‘delinking’ on the one hand and on the ever increasing in-country exchanges between city and country, between industry and agriculture, with food and raw materials moving to the cities and with consumer and producer goods and inputs moving to the countryside on the other. Collective savings geared to investment could then be drawn essentially, if not exclusively, from the expanding economic pool. Expanded reproduction privileging the betterment of the people’s lot as a short- rather than a long-term project promises a much sounder basis for an effective (rather than merely rhetorical) alliance of workers, peasants and others and for a democratic road to revolutionary socialism.

This approach [also underscores] the simultaneous importance of potential South-South relations. Linkages such as those foreshadowed in the World Social Forum seek, multi-nationally, to redefine the workings of the global economy; small wonder, that Amin devoted much of his later years to political work within the World Social Forum network to help recraft from below a world-wide movement and sensibility designed, at the very least, to effectively 'regulate' global capitalism in the interest of socially responsible and democratic purposes - to make the 'globally necessary' the 'globally possible'!

Even at the level of the national economy Amin was not proposing the extirpation of any and all market relations. His realism anticipates that the creation and empowerment of national movements capable of countering the logic of capitalism's embrace, global and national, will be tough work. So strong are the global pressures against it that crafting the national political basis necessary will not itself easily become the 'nationally possible.' Small wonder that Amin himself saw the global and national struggles for socialist strategies of delinking from the logic of market-primacy and for taking the economy beyond global capitalism as being two sides of the same coin.

If the predominant importance of democratic and needs-focused planning (both globally and locally) is to be achieved, it will be planning which ensures that the centre of gravity of the economy remains egalitarian, collectively-premised, popularly-centred and controlled. This could counter-balance the possible costs of any judicious deployment of market mechanisms. The bottom-line would remain, as Amin emphasized, a self-consciousness about societal transition away from market power and entrepreneurial class interest. This would help ensure that no bourgeoisie, foreign or domestic, would play roles to justify any claim it might make to continue to snatch inordinate wealth or power for itself.

* *John S. Saul, Toronto, August 14, 2018*

Tribute to the Great Master, Comrade and Brother Samir Amin

By Ndongo Samba Sylla

'What fascinates us about Samir Amin is to a certain extent his 'indiscipline.' Indiscipline in a double sense. First, his thinking transcends academic divisions. Samir Amin mobilised in his research knowledge relevant to history, politics, philosophy, anthropology, sociology of culture, religions, etc. Since his scientific contributions transcend the field of economics, it is reductive to call him an 'economist.'

Secondly, Samir Amin occupies a rebel position in the Marxist citadel. His standpoint is that being a Marxist means starting from, not stopping at Marx. Amin's problem with many Western Marxists is either that they did not try to go beyond Marx or were unable to lucidly appreciate the full implications of the imperialist nature of capitalism. The originality and breadth Samir brought to the theory of development would be impossible without this vigilant iconoclasm to received wisdoms. His scientific work is therefore quite the opposite of standard economics theorists who have the license not to discuss their key theoretical assumptions, to disregard reality in the construction of their models, to ignore new facts that may refute them and not to scrutinise their analytical implications.

That is why he always enabled us to see our world in new ways. Samir Amin helped our understanding of capitalism as an historical system with specific characteristics [not one whose logic and ethos has existed, and will endure, throughout the ages], most important among which is its polarising nature. Far from homogenising the world under the rule of the law of value, it creates and magnifies by necessity the economic inequalities between the countries of the centers and those of the peripheries. [Even in our age of the so-called global village] globalisation promotes homogeneity only in two dimensions - free capital flows on one side, free goods and services flows on the other - but not for the free movement of

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Tackling these monopolies requires 'daring', a daring that must be translated in the Global North by the emergence of an anti-monopolies front and in the Global South by that of an anti-comprador front. That he emerged as one of the leading figures of the movement for a globalisation in the service of the peoples is not at all a surprise.

* *Ndongo Samba Sylla, Dakar, August 16, 2018*