

Samir Amin: Tribute to the Great Master, Comrade and Brother

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Samir Amin (1931-2018) was one of the thinkers of the Global South who contributed decisively to starting the epistemological break with the Eurocentric discourse that permeates the social sciences and humanities. His passing on August 12 is a huge loss for his family, friends, collaborators and many sympathisers around the world. As much as the Marxist intellectual / Communist militant was exceptional with an uncompromising ethical commitment, Samir was also humble, obliging and generous. It was a privilege to have been able to collaborate with this father figure and ardent fighter for the internationalism of the peoples who always signed his emails with the mention 'fraternally.'

It seems appropriate to reproduce the substance of the introduction that I brought during his lifetime and in his presence on October 25, 2014 at the University Cheikh Anta Diop of Dakar. That day, Demba Moussa Dembélé, in collaboration with the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation, organised a ceremony in honour of Samir Amin that brought together African intellectuals, diplomats, politicians, students, etc. The words I spoke on this occasion which seem to me even more relevant today than ever:

'Taking advantage of the opportunity given to me here, I will, with much modesty, try to articulate the intellectual scope of our dear Professor and what I have learned from his teachings. You will understand in a certain way that this is a talk of a student who wandered about with 'Aminian intuitions' before having been properly invigorated following the discovery and reading of the writings of Samir Amin.

What fascinates us with Samir Amin is to a certain extent his 'indiscipline.' Indiscipline in a double sense. First, his thinking goes beyond existing academic divisions. Samir Amin has mobilised in his research knowledge that is relevant to areas such as history, politics, philosophy, anthropology, sociology of culture, sociology of religions, etc. Since his scientific contributions transcend the field of economics, it is reductive, therefore, to call him an 'economist.' And all the more so because we know the definition he gives of the 'economist', namely a 'sincere believer convinced of the virtues of liberalism.'

Second, it must be said that Samir Amin occupies a rebel position in the Marxist citadel, an aspect often ignored. His point of view has always been that being a Marxist means starting from Marx, *not stopping at Marx*. Amin's problem with many Western Marxists is either that they did not try to go beyond Marx or, if so, they were not able to lucidly appreciate the analytical implications of the intrinsically imperialist nature of historical capitalism. On the intellectual level, writes Amin, 'historical Marxism and the left in general are poorly equipped to face the challenge of globalisation.'

If Samir Amin is a prolific thinker, it is because he is at first an undisciplined thinker. The original syntheses he produced and the new breath he brought to the theory of development would not be possible without an attitude of epistemological vigilance which consists in refusing the inconsiderate worship of idols, even if they are comforting on a psychological and ideological levels.

What must also be said about Amin is that he is a systematic thinker. By this I mean that he is one of the few intellectuals capable of proposing great theoretical syntheses which start from a careful examination of historical facts, which are based on coherent reasoning from beginning to end, which makes it possible to understand from a new angle the world in which we live and which continues to keep their relevance with the unfolding of historical time. His scientific work is therefore quite the opposite of standard economics theorists who have the license not to discuss the theoretical assumptions of their models, to disregard reality in the construction of their models, to ignore new facts that may refute them and not to scrutinise their analytical implications. Indeed, for standard economics, normal science consists in the enhancement of the 'epistemology of ignorance' (to use a concept of the Jamaican-American philosopher Charles Wade Mills).

It is not my purpose to go into the details of Amin's scientific contributions. I will confine myself to indicating some lessons which seem to me essential.

From his earliest publications, Amin defended the thesis that capitalism should be understood as a global system with specific historical properties. One of them concerns the new relationship it introduces between the economic on the one hand, the political and the ideological on the other. Amin rightly observes that the law of value, the fact that the economy dictates its law in all social spheres, operates only in the capitalist system. In earlier systems, as he emphasises, power commanded wealth. With capitalism, it is wealth that now commands power. This inversion, far from being a violation of the canons of historical materialism, is illustrative of the subtlety of a thought attentive to the qualitative changes that punctuate historical evolution. In insisting on the historical specificity of the law of value, Samir Amin allows us to see, following Marx, that capitalism is accompanied by a form of alienation (commodity fetishism) which differs from the preceding forms of alienation of a religious type. It also protects us from the temptation to apply the laws of capitalism to the historical systems that preceded it. A trap in which most neoclassical economists fall: for example, in the latest book by Thomas Piketty who claims to talk about capitalism, yet there are charts that show the evolution of the global rate of return on capital before and after tax, from Antiquity to the present day!

One of the most important characteristics of the capitalist system, as opposed to the type of historical system that preceded it, and to which Samir Amin gave the name of 'tributary mode of production,' is its polarising nature. In other words, capitalism is a system which, far from homogenising the world under the rule of the law of value, creates and magnifies by necessity the economic inequalities between the countries of the centers and those of the peripheries. Indeed, the capitalist system is intrinsically imperialist. Imperialism, says Samir Amin in contradistinction to Lenin, is not the supreme stage of capitalism. Imperialism is inscribed in the DNA of capitalism. Moreover, its processes have evolved historically: from imperialisms in plural – that is competing imperialist powers – we moved to a collective imperialism of the Triad (United States, Europe and Japan). By insisting on the specifics of contemporary imperialism, Samir Amin distanced himself very early from the rather vague and nebulous theories of Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt, authors who defend the idea of

an 'Empire' without imperialists.

As part of his conceptualisation of historical capitalism, Samir Amin could not help tackling Eurocentrism. As an important aspect of the dominant ideology, Eurocentrism has the function of hiding the true nature of the capitalist system, including its imperialist foundations and the form of alienation it produces, to distort the history of its genesis via its insistence on European exceptionalism, and to mask its polarising character. Through his criticism of Eurocentrism and the culturalist reactions that it provoked, Amin was able to highlight its racist cultural foundations, its ideological nature as well as its scientific limitations.

If Samir Amin offered one of the most penetrating and original critiques of 'scientific capitalism' (a humorous phrase I borrow from James Ferguson) he also pointed out what alternative paths can lead the 'wretched of the earth' towards the authentic human civilisation that capitalism can only refuse them. At this point, we arrive to the Aminian reflections around 'delinking': a concept that does not mean an autarchic retreat but rather 'a strategic inversion in the vision of internal/external relations, in response to the unavoidable requirements of a self-centered development.'

The 'delinking' program is based on the observation that there can be no economic 'catch-up' within the capitalist system. For one simple reason: what exacerbates the polarisation between centers and peripheries is the fact that globalisation operates only in two dimensions – capital flows on one side, goods and services flows on the other – and does not concern labour movements. If the peripheral countries, about 80 percent of the world's population, want to 'catch up by imitating' the countries of the centers, they would have to find, according to Amin, five to six new Americas in order to reduce their structural surplus of manpower. To 'delink' for the countries of the peripheries thus supposes to break out of the illusion of 'catching up.' Indeed, as Samir Amin says, when one realises, by virtue of the law of worldwide value, that the reproduction of the Western 'model' is impossible to realise in the global South, then it will be necessary to turn towards alternatives.

Yet, on this point, Samir Amin teaches us that the delinking strategies that were successful yesterday are not necessarily valid today. These must take into account the transformations of the capitalist/imperialist system. In the past, industrialisation could be an acceptable indicator of economic development. Nowadays, this is not necessarily the case because countries have been able to industrialise while remaining peripheral. So, according to Samir Amin, the opposition industrialised countries/non-industrialised countries has now lost its empirical relevance.

The struggle today for the peoples of the peripheries is, according to Amin, to put an end to the 'five monopolies' exercised by the Triad, which are the basis of the polarising dynamics characteristic of contemporary capitalism. These include the monopoly of weapons of mass destruction, the monopoly of technologies, the control of financial flows, the monopoly of access to the planet's natural resources and the monopoly of communications. Tackling these monopolies is obviously not an easy task. For Samir Amin, this 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. At a stage where, to use his own terms, capitalism has become 'senile', 'abstract' and even 'barbaric' the delinking program implies in particular for the countries of the South to defend family farming, via a more egalitarian distribution of land. Otherwise it is difficult to imagine how these countries could manage in a civilised way their structural excess of manpower. This would figure

among the starting points for the long road towards socialism.

I will end by pointing out that Amin is also a man of great generosity. Thanks to his sense of initiative, he has helped to set up high quality research institutes (Enda Tiers Monde, CODESRIA, African Institute for Economic Development and Planning, World Forum for Alternatives, Third World Forum). Through his writings, his interventions and conferences, he has never ceased to give and to highlight the perspective of the Global South and the wretched of the earth. That he is at the moment one of the leading figures of the movement for a globalisation in the service of the peoples is not at all a surprise, considering his extraordinary intellectual itinerary.

Dear Professor, we will certainly never be able to pay tribute to you for the immensity and wealth of the contributions you have made over the last fifty years. But we will try to keep the Aminian tradition 'hot', especially with the younger generations. I also hope that the community of radical sympathisers, activists and researchers will soon be able to organise themselves in such a way as to be able to properly honour you. Thank you for your attention.'

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