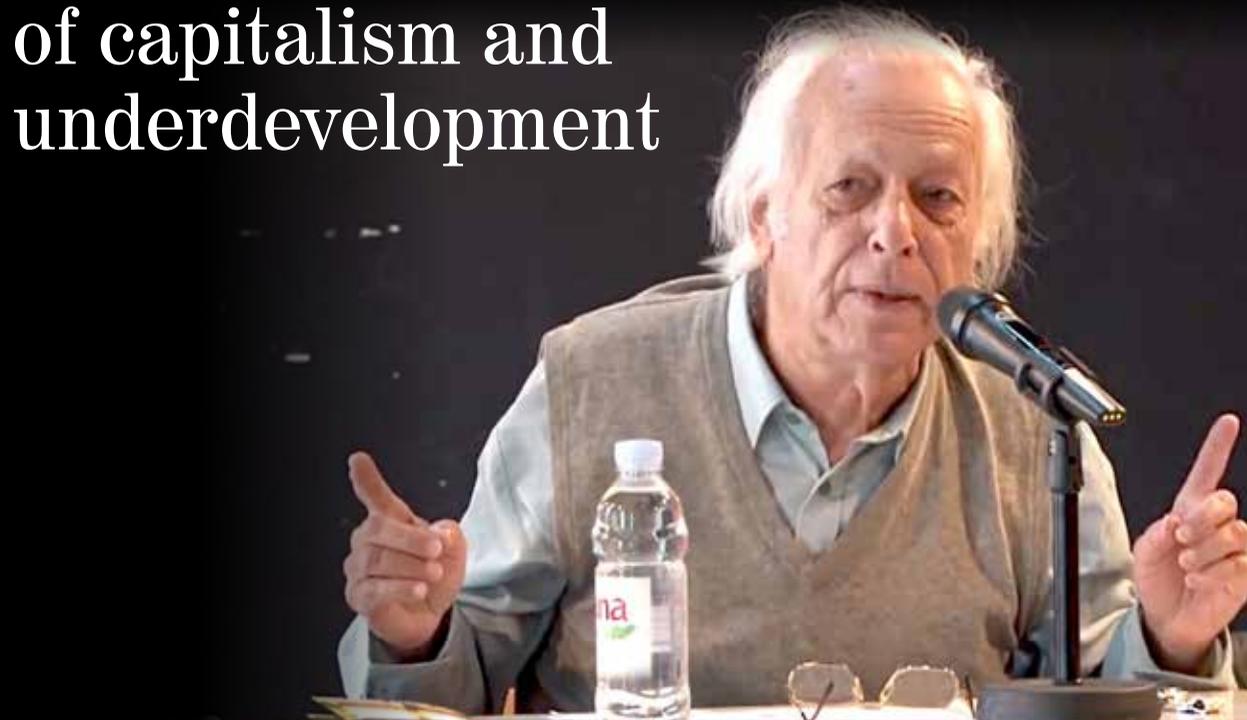


**SAMIR AMIN**

# A formidable analyst of capitalism and underdevelopment



In the face of war declared by monopoly capital, workers and peoples must develop strategies that allow them to take the offensive.

By Peter Lawrence

Samir Amin, the eminent Egyptian-French political economist, who died in August 2018, devoted his life to the analysis of global capitalism and to the place of the developing countries within that system. He was born in Cairo, moved to France for his higher education, and then spent most of the rest of his life based in Dakar, first as the Director of the UN's Institute for Development and Economic Planning (IDEP), and then as the Director and an activist of the Africa Office of the Third World Forum, which he helped to set up. He was a thinker who authored many books and an activist who identified and often joined in with the struggles of the peoples of Africa in particular, but also elsewhere in what we now call the 'Global South'.

This article examines his contribution to a deeper understanding of the position of the Global South in the world economy and what he argued needed to be done to change it for the better. His was a committed political position as a Marxist socialist who sought through his work to show that the capitalist system had run its course and would eventually be replaced by a socialist one, though the road to socialism would be long. He emphasised the critical role of class struggle in this process and because of the existence of a world capitalist mode of production, he believed that this could only be effective at a global level and would require the unity of the working class and other oppressed classes across the globe, though he did

still see national struggles as a critical building block.

His first major work published in English was a two-volume study of the relationship between the developed capitalist 'centre' and the less developed but still capitalist 'periphery' (Amin, 1974a). Both were viewed as integrated parts of a world system of capital accumulation. Concepts of 'centre' and 'periphery' were not new when Amin first published his work, nor was the idea that development and underdevelopment were in his words 'two opposite poles of a dialectical unity'. The pioneering work by Raul Prebisch (1950) and Andre Gunder Frank (1966), acknowledged by Amin as important to his own insights, had introduced and developed these two

concepts. In Amin's model of the world economy the unequal relationship between the centre and periphery was an integral part of the process of capital accumulation at the centre and of the way in which capitalism could overcome its persistent crises, especially by using the periphery to reverse falling rates of profit.

Amin was a strong critic of conventional economics which he called an 'ideology of universal harmonies' in which everything fell into place with firms and people respectively maximising profits and welfare by entering markets and behaving rationally in relation to prices. When applied to underdevelopment, this approach omitted to explain how development and underdevelopment had unfolded historically. Instead, the poverty of the developing countries was explained by an inherent backwardness. It had nothing to do with the extraction of surplus through the repatriation of profits to the centre, nor with the extraction of mineral wealth with value added accruing to processors and manufacturers in the centre, nor with the consumption of luxury goods by a small but growing political and small business elite.

Amin followed Marx in arguing that capitalism had by its very logic to expand and incorporate more markets and populations in its incessant search for higher rates of profit. This search took Capital into new geographical areas of pre-capitalist formations often far from its 'home base'. He also embraced later Marxist ideas, especially those of Lenin and others, pointing to the increasingly monopolistic nature of capitalism, contradicting the simple mainstream economic ideas of competition between many firms resulting in the lowest possible price and the maximum welfare.

However, capital's expansion into pre-capitalist formations had dominated but not transformed them. The economic formations of the peripheral economies had been 'blocked' and not able to make the transition to fully capitalist formations in the same way as those of the centre had done. Rejecting concepts of dualism, in which peripheral economies were divided into 'modern' and 'traditional'

sectors, Amin argued that pre-capitalist formations had transitioned into 'social formations of peripheral capitalism' in which the two sectors of dualism were an integral part of one capitalist system.

In this system, the centre produced capital goods developed through advanced technologies in order to manufacture mass consumer goods for its populations in what Amin called an autocentric system. In the periphery, foreign capital first extracted resources for export which paid for the imports of relatively luxury products for a small elite class within the peripheral economies. Even if some of those consumer goods were produced within the peripheral economies, their markets were small and the capital goods needed for that production

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had to be imported from the centre. This maintained the centre's control and the periphery's dependence. The system of accumulation at the centre inhibited any possibility of countries in the periphery following an 'autocentric' development path such as that which produced the existing developed countries. In that sense, he followed the position developed by Gunder Frank that development and underdevelopment were two sides of the same coin.

That thesis did not exclude the possibility of some degree of self-centred development taking place, as was evidenced in parts of Asia and Latin America, although that still left a substantial part of the populations of these 'miracle' countries in abject poverty. However, for Africa, it was

clear to Amin that its 'extraverted' economies produced value that was transferred from the periphery to the centre through the processes mentioned earlier but in addition because of the unequal exchange of labour value. This was the result of wages in comparable productive activities in the periphery being lower than those at the centre to a much greater degree than the difference in output per worker in both. Further, cheap labour produced the exports of raw materials, both agricultural and mineral, to a centre where the value of labour embodied in the final product was higher. In both ways value was transferred from periphery to centre.

Amin rejected dogmatic applications of quasi-Marxist or any other generalisations of the historical development of modes of production. He distinguished between pre-capitalist European feudal formations and their prior primitive formations and the 'tributary' mode of production which he argued was prevalent in Asia and Africa. According to Amin, this tributary social formation comprised two classes: a peasantry organised in communities and a ruling class exercising political power over the communities and levying 'a (non-commodity) tribute' from them. The difference from feudalism was that it was the community as a whole that had the rights of allocation of land and not the rulers who held the land on behalf of the members of the community.

However, none of these modes of production appeared in a pure or even monopolistic form. He argued that there were a variety of 'Oriental and African formations' with three main characteristics: a communal or tributary mode of production, simple commodity relations in some areas and long distance trade relations. It was the aggressive expansion of the capitalist mode of production that effected their transition to peripheral capitalism; but at the same time, in the shape of imperialism, enabling the expansion of foreign capital into the colonies, thus inhibiting peripheral capitalism from developing into the autocentric capitalism of post-feudal Europe.

As a consequence of colonialism, Amin found three resulting types of

economy across Africa.

First was the 'Africa of the labour reserves' which supplied labour to plantations and the mines; secondly, the 'Africa of the colonial trade economy or l'économie du traite', in which smallholder farmers produced agricultural commodities for export via monopoly trading companies; and thirdly, the 'Africa of the concessionary companies', commercialised large scale agriculture on alienated land – the plantations and estates (Amin, 1972:519-524).

With the introduction of domestic manufacturing mainly in the post-colonial period, the resulting economic structure for African countries typically had three characteristics. First, there were substantial differences in productivity between different spheres of the economy. While in the developed centre productivities in the different sectors are much closer to each other, in developing countries productivity in manufacturing using advanced technology is much higher than in the agricultural or service sectors. Second, the economies of the periphery were 'disarticulated' in the sense that they are 'made up of atoms... the density of the flow of external exchanges being relatively greater and that of the flow of internal exchanges very much less'. There was little integration between the different sectors of manufacturing, for example with the machines and other inputs having to be imported, because these items were made in the Centre. Thirdly, peripheral economies were externally dominated, 'extraverted' rather than autocratic. (Amin, 1974a:288).

In this global economic structure, it was not possible for the extraverted peripheral economies to 'catch up' since their growth rates were dependent on the growth rates at the Centre where the demand for their exports lay. So while there could be bursts of growth in the periphery as new markets or products at the centre emerged creating a short term growth in demand for various raw material inputs from the periphery, in the medium and longer run these growth rates converged to the Centre's growth rate. In that process of falling growth rates comes falling world

prices for the commodities previously in high demand making it difficult for peripheral economies to become less introverted and more articulated – that is, to develop.

Not that Amin didn't recognise the changes that had taken place by the 1970s, especially in Africa. Treating Africa as backward and static was part of the racist inheritance of colonialism:

*...Black Africa is probably that part of the Third World which has undergone the most thoroughgoing transformations during the last half century, and it is still changing with amazing speed. (Amin, 1974a:364)*

Amin noted that this transformation had been uneven. The subjects to colonial rule were largely living in rural communities with a very basic level of production, consumption and technology. There was therefore no possibility for the development of a national bourgeoisie, although a rural

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bourgeoisie had developed in some parts of the continent as a result of the commercialisation of agriculture, which still was outward oriented. The formation of an urban bourgeoisie had been delayed as colonialism restricted the development of a trading class which might, through moves into industrial activity, have become a powerful national bourgeoisie. Instead it was the petty bourgeoisie of government officials and state sector managers that dominated urban areas. Politics was played out in terms of relations between this class and the local small business and foreign capitalist classes with the peripheral bourgeoisie, as a comprador class, colluding with and dependent on the

central bourgeoisie.

Capitalist development was therefore blocked at the level of low agricultural productivity and final stage industrialisation. Such development could only move forward with an increase in agricultural productivity to feed the towns and with an articulated basic industry which produced for itself as well as for a consumer market. Amin of course recognised the differences within the periphery, but where, as in the case of some Latin American countries, he did find evidence of articulated industrial integration, he argued that unlike the countries of the centre, these countries exhibited only a partial autocratic development in that a substantial part of the population was excluded and so the output of this sector was based on a limited internal market.

Later work took in the development of globalisation as a concept and actual process in which world capitalism comprised five monopolies: technological monopoly of large corporations supported by the state especially in the defence industries; financial control of global financial markets; monopolistic exploitation of natural resources around the globe; monopolisation of the media; and finally monopolisation by the United States of military weaponry of mass destruction. Such global monopolisation had created a 'new hierarchy, more unequal than ever before ... subordinating the industries of the peripheries and reducing them to the role of subcontracting.' (Amin 1997: 4-5)

In his earlier work Amin questioned the view that multinational corporations were the beginning of a world production process as being somewhat exaggerated. However, writing 50 years later he recognised the changes that had taken place and especially the increasing concentration of capital in what he termed the 'system of generalised and globalised monopolies' concentrated in the Triad, as he called the US, Europe and Japan. These entities controlled 'all the systems of production' (Amin, 2013:400):

*'Globalization' is the name they have given to the set of demands*

*by which they exert their control over the productive systems of the periphery of global capitalism (the world beyond the partners of the triad). It is nothing other than a new stage of imperialism.* (Amin, 2013:400)

Because of their dominance over markets the monopolies can extract rents, that is, make higher profits than they would be able to in competitive markets – and do this to an even greater extent in peripheral economies where labour is cheaper. The concentration of capital in fewer corporations means that there is a similar concentration of wealth in the hands of a global plutocracy. Amin has 30 large monopolies (sometimes banks) dominating global markets, while other research suggests that the top 50 control three-quarters of global corporate capital and 90% of those are banks and other financial corporates (Vitali et al, 2011; Lawrence, 2017). Amin recognises this financialisation in which more profits can be made ‘investing’ or rather speculating in financial markets, thus requiring non-financial activities to produce comparable returns to their shareholders. Not surprisingly, this has led to increasingly inequality and the creation of a global plutocracy.

The system’s sustainability requires both public and private debt to keep it going; public to underwrite risky corporate activity and rescue corporates too big to fail, and private to compensate for lower real wages to keep consumer goods industries in business. For Amin, this is a system that is ‘imploding before our eyes’ under the weight of its own contradictions, and especially in the case of financial markets which almost brought it down in 2008. It is a system in which ‘monopoly capital has declared war on workers and peoples’ (Amin, 2013: 401).

Amin was scathing about the way some critics of his framework, and that of Gunder Frank and the dependistas, argued that capitalism was developing the periphery, that statistics showed that GDP was growing fast in some countries, that there was a growing proletariat and that the spread of agricultural and industrial capitalism would destroy

pre-existing social formations (Warren, 1980; Smith, 1980). The success stories of countries like South Korea did not disprove Amin’s theory. In his view these countries were special cases with very specific histories including massive support from the capitalist centre as well as specific domestic class characteristics, neither of which obtained in most of the periphery. In particular South Korea and Taiwan’s growth and development was ‘based on major agrarian reforms (certainly for fear of contagion by the Communist model) strengthened by the exceptional egalitarian sense of Confucian ideology. The emergence of national bourgeoisies and national capitalisms is more evident in what Amin calls Confucian Asia, helped by the Chinese diaspora, than it has been in Latin America or Africa, where

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middle classes have grown and created internal markets not accessible to the mass of the population. The case of South Africa is also a special one where the labour reserve economy did to a large extent destroy pre-capitalist formations.

People nowadays are told that there is no alternative to neoliberal programmes and Amin certainly rejects the various alternatives that have been proposed, some taken up by sections of the Left. He critiques them in detail.

Market regulation has not stopped further wild speculative activity in financial markets. A return to social democracy is not possible now because capitalism is not the same as it was in the post second world war period. Building

consensual movements around such issues as the environment will not affect the power of the monopolists. Movements around religions are no substitute for democratic class struggles nor are those built around concepts like personal freedom. But Amin argues that this kind of resistance is not enough. ‘In the face of war declared by monopoly capital, workers and peoples must develop strategies that allow them to take the offensive.’ This requires ‘audacity, more audacity, always audacity’ (Amin, 2013:408).

Overcoming the resulting and increasing inequality and impoverishment of large sections of peripheral capitalist societies would result in the growth of social movements opposed to the system, demanding change. Such change would not mean a move to socialism, impossible in a Marxist sense given the low level of development of technology (the productive forces), but what he called ‘popular national construction’ in which the three tendencies of socialism, capitalism and statism combine and conflict’ (Amin, 1990). In this sense, the emergence of different kinds of social movements across the world, both in the centre and periphery, suggests a way in which capitalism can be challenged both internationally and within nations and begin popular national construction and a process of delinking from the capitalist centre. The jump from movements which resist to movements which engage in popular national construction is not one Amin fleshes out even in theory.

So Amin asks Lenin’s famous question: what is to be done? He outlines what he calls an ‘audacious programme for the radical left’. This programme he organises under three headings: first, socialising the ownership of monopolies; secondly, de-financialising the management of the economy; and thirdly, de-globalising international relations.

Socialisation of monopolies means first nationalisation and then democratic management through democratic control of decision making by representatives of those groups with involvement in that monopoly,

both upstream and downstream. These include suppliers, consumers and others, including local authorities with interests and responsibilities in the geographical areas affected by the institution's activities. This would be especially important in peripheral economies where much greater weight in decision making as well as in productivity enhancing farming technologies would need to be given to peasantries.

De-financialising the management of the economy would mean democratising the banks and the central bank in much the same way as for the other monopoly dominated sectors. It would also mean abolishing the trade in speculative financial products but would still require banks and other financial institutions to conduct business – especially mobilise savings and channel investment funds to needed productive activities.

Amin's third element in the programme, de-globalising international relations, brings us to Amin's original idea of *delinking*. This was not 'an autarkic retreat, but rather as a strategic reversal in the face of both internal and external forces in response to the unavoidable requirements of self-determined development'.

Delinking from the world capitalist law of value logically follows from the thesis that the world system dominated by global capital slows down the development of the peripheral economies it has created. It involves an 'autocentric national development starting from the abolition of the dominant forms of private ownership of land and factories, and taking agriculture as its base, that is, not envisaging any forced appropriation from the peasants to 'hasten industrialisation' and opting for the most egalitarian income distribution (notably between rural earnings and workers' pay'.

However delinking does not mean autarky. It does not mean opposition to foreign technology of any kind. It does mean recognising that technology is not neutral and so using a mix of technologies at appropriate periods of development. It does mean involving the people in the decisions about which technologies to use as well as

participating in 'world scientific and ideological currents' (Amin, 1980:63). It means controlling foreign capital not abandoning it. A further part of delinking is the control of foreign investment flows, especially speculative investment by not connecting with global financial markets and thus controlling capital flight. (Amin and Bush, 2015).

If more countries of the global South moved in this direction, globalisation would be therefore be rebuilt on the basis of 'negotiation, rather than submission to the exclusive interests of the imperialist monopolies'.

A globalised system serving the market had to be replaced with an 'alternative humanist project of globalisation' governed by a world political system which would effect general disarmament, 'equitable

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access' to global resources, 'flexible economic relationships between the world's major regions' to 'reduce the centres' technological and financial monopolies', including the 'liquidation' of the three international financial institutions: the World Bank, the IMF and the WTO, and finally with a global parliament. He argues that it would also lead to greater global equality.

He recognises that this will be a long process and that there would be many obstacles to achieving this version of globalisation, but considers it to be the only way to make progress 'on the long road to socialism' (Amin, 2013:408). In an earlier interview, he explained the 'long road':

...if the transition to socialism

is a long road we should not be surprised that it is full of 'thermidors' [since the French revolution the word 'Thermidor' has come to mean retreat from the radical goals in a revolution] and even restorations.

It has been the strategy of imperialists from 1991 or so to make it impossible to rebuild such a multi-polar, polycentric system, not only by newly globalisation and so on, but more important, through the tool of military interventions. But US imperialism has proven to be unable to achieve its targets, because it has created even more chaos. .... so the problem is now how to conceive of the organisation of the movements, which could crystallise into a political force, able to challenge and ultimately change political power. (Amin and Zeilig, 2017)

Given that he had previously been criticised for arguing that changes cannot take place at the national but only at the global level, here he appears to reject this view, if it was ever his. The changes in strategies against imperialism he is proposing can only take place at a national level 'in the context of states/nations with advanced radical social and political struggles, committed to a process of socialization of the management of their economy'. However, 'delinking implies political solidarity between countries of the south to defeat the project of military control of the planet by the US, Europe and Japan'. The existence of a world capitalist system did not mean that national states did not have any room for manoeuvre in pursuing policies which would generate real development for the whole population of a country. His position was that this could only happen through a delinking from the capitalist system. This was a consequence of the failure of the system to produce national bourgeoisies which would develop a national capitalism ultimately along Keynesian lines. Instead the bourgeoisies that have emerged after decolonisation have become compradors dependent upon and serving the national and international bourgeoisies of the centre.

Autocentric development, argued Amin, required the 'creation of

integrated industrial groups made up of complementary activities'. Whatever was created would depend on country conditions, for example the kinds of raw materials available. This would have implications for the structure of foreign trade which would need to change to reflect a changed division of labour in which domestic production would be designed primarily to satisfy domestic needs of the whole population and not the manufactured consumer good needs of the centre and a small elite in the periphery. For Africa with its mineral wealth, an industrialisation-based strategy would be more appropriate than the one based on agriculture which African countries had been advised to take. In any event development would only be possible for the countries of the periphery if they broke with the world market. This conclusion was to inform much of Amin's later work.

Not that Amin had anything against investing in agriculture to provide basic foods for the population rather than exporting agricultural products. Indeed what was needed was a:

*... gradual increase in the productivity of peasant agriculture based on different combinations of agro-ecological and input-mediated strategies .... (which) will doubtless be slow but continuous, and would make it possible to control the exodus of the rural populations to the towns (in the North and South), as well as provide opportunities to construct mutually beneficial autonomous food systems in underserved communities with regards to local economies, food supply and diet. At the level of what is called the world market, the desirable regulation can probably be done through inter-regional and rural-urban agreements that meet the requirements of a kind of sustainable development that integrates people rather than excludes them (Amin, 2012: 21).*

The agrarian question may have been solved for the countries of the centre, but he argued that the solution for the periphery was not commercialised and industrialised agriculture driving people off the land to become an industrial and urban proletariat, but a smallholder based

agriculture which could provide a living for the rural population and limit the migration to the already overcrowded cities.

Such a strategy required audacity which 'under such circumstances, involves engaging vigorously and coherently towards this end, the required measures of delinking with the desired advances in social progress (Amin, 2013: 407). But who engages? Certainly the peasant movements:

*Resistance by peasants, small family farmers and the poor consumers most affected by the dysfunctional global food system is essential in order to build a real and genuinely human alternative. We must ensure the functionality and resilience of family and peasant agriculture for the visible future of the twenty-first century, quite simply because they allow us to resolve the agrarian question underlying world hunger*

**“ Development would only be possible for the countries of the periphery if they broke with the world market. ”**

*and poverty. Peasant, family and improved, agro-ecological agriculture – along with a new relation with consumers and labour – are essential to overcome the destructive logic of capitalism. (Amin, 2012: 21)*

More than that, given globalisation, the class struggle

*....must be considered on the world scale (his emphasis), ..... the bourgeoisie (of the centre, the only bourgeoisie that exists at the level of the world system) exploits their proletarian and proletarianised masses everywhere, at the centre and the periphery alike, but that it exploits those of the periphery more violently and brutally, and that this can happen because the objective mechanism which is the basis for the unity that links the bourgeoisie with its own proletariat (owing to the autocentric character of the national*

*economy from which it arises), a mechanism that limits exploitation at the centre, does not function in the extraverted periphery. (Amin, 1974a:600)*

Even so, Amin argued that the radical left in the 'imperialist triad' needs to build 'an alternative anti-monopoly social bloc', while in the peripheries, the radical left builds an 'anti-comprador bloc'. This is indeed the problem for socialists everywhere and especially organising across national borders. But for Amin, joining up struggles nationally and internationally was crucial and it was clear where responsibilities for doing this lay:

It is the responsibility, first, of activists in the grassroots movements to see that, however legitimate their action, its efficiency is limited by the fact that it does not move beyond a fragmented struggle. But it is also the responsibility of the intellectuals. Not the academics, but those thinkers and others operating in politics, who must realise that there is no possibility of changing the balance of power without joining the struggles being carried forward by the social movements – not to dominate them or seek their own fame, but to integrate the activity of grassroots social movements into their political thinking and strategies of change. (Amin, 2012: 24)

For the class struggle to be waged on a world scale required the centre's proletariat to drop its tendency to see it first triumphing in Europe and then bringing socialism to the periphery. This was yet another form of 'Eurocentrism', in which the capitalist mode of production that emerged in Europe and then North America is seen as the universalist mode of production, as the capitalism of the centre incorporates more social formations into its orbit.

Amin did venture into world economic and cultural history, arguing that the peripheral Atlantic Europe appropriated the history and culture of the then central Mediterranean Europe in falsely tracing its history to ancient Greece and then seeking to universalise its culture and its capitalist development to emphasise its superiority to other cultures, for example the Islamist-Arab culture and history. Amin sees this

tendency as a means of justifying the spread of capitalism around the world (Amin, 1988).

However, Eurocentrics of left and right should be careful. In an interview in 2017, he pointed out that historically, peripheral cultures eventually surpassed the centre:

*Yes, I dared even to write that the most advanced parts of the pre-capitalist world, were not where change starts. It is rather at the peripheries. Now, the most advanced system before capitalism spread across the world was not in Europe; it was in China and that has been recognised again today – though it had been recognised in the 18th Century. China, was the model for the Europeans. ...Democracy was not on the agenda, but China had invented, ten centuries before the Europeans, a civil service. You have to wait until late in the 19th Century to have a civil service in Europe, the idea of recruiting bureaucrats and civil servants of the state by examinations and so on, which was invented a thousand years ago in China was unheard of. (Amin and Zeilig, 2017).*

Amin's insistence on the power of global capital to subordinate the periphery to the centre and therefore to transfer value from the one to the other has by now been empirically justified not least by the work on capital flight from the periphery to the centre and its tax havens (Fjeldstad et al, 2017). Whether this is put in terms of a worldwide law of value, as Amin does, or whether it is put in terms of prices, as he also does, there is little doubt that capital is transferred in various ways from periphery to centre, even if that transfer is preceded by one going the other way which sets up capital investment in the first place. Workers in the periphery may have the same level of productivity as workers in the centre because they operate with the same level of technology, but there wages are lower and so profits are higher and are repatriated to the shareholders of the corporation in the centre.

Some might have expected capitalism to spread and bring the consumer benefits to the mass of the people as has happened at the centre, but so far the beneficiaries have been

a small privileged 'middle' class and a small section of the working class. Indeed Marx himself expected the development of the railway system in India in the nineteenth century to result in a rapid rate of development but as Amin noted even Marx could not have predicted the way in which British imperialism, by destroying the Indian textile industry, ensured that there was no industrial rivalry to Britain to come from a developed India (Tharoor, 2017).

The development of capitalism in Africa has not resulted in significant

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structural changes to its economies. They are still largely dependent on the vagaries of world commodity markets, exporting raw materials and importing capital and consumer goods directed to a domestic market of higher income consumers, whose income derives from the high end of commodity trading, financial activities and their servicing, and those with larger farms and estates.

Meanwhile large proportions of the African populations languish on or below the poverty line. The self-centred economy described in Amin's articles and books has as its 'central determining relationship': that of the production of capital goods for the production of consumer goods for the mass market. In the periphery on the other hand, that relationship is a 'peripheral-dependent' between earning export income in order to consume 'luxury' goods. In the capitalist developed countries this system had been achieved in Amin's approach, by a 'social contract' between increasingly monopolised capital and organised

labour which allowed for some degree of 'planning' to avoid the cyclical fluctuations associated with capitalism before the second world war and especially between the first and second world wars. Amin defines the underlying contradiction of capitalism which causes these fluctuations as one between what the system allows to be produced and what, in its search for profit, it prevents people consuming; but he argues that ensuing cyclical fluctuations have been moderated by the 'social contract'.

However, in analysing the system in this way, Amin rejected the prevailing view in both the capitalist 'West' and the socialist 'East' that development entailed catching up with the developed capitalist countries. His key insight was to argue that given the way the global system worked, countries such as those of Africa were not going to achieve the status of a developed country by imitating their development trajectory, or by concentrating on their raw material export base and slowly industrialise by importing capital goods. The history of the world was not about followers catching up with leaders but about dominant civilisations being 'transcended' by peripheral ones as the former decline and the peripheral overtake them with different social organisations. In this case a socialist self-centred development would eventually transcend moribund capitalism. This required an overall strategy of 'self-reliance' but one built up from popular bases 'becoming aware of reality' (Amin's emphasis) and allowed for the increasing domination of a 'self-centred' system. Of course the political activity required to achieve this in the face of an active and global imperialism has and continues to be the key issue, and not just in the periphery. As Amin observed:

*It is quite appropriate to describe the task of transition thus: transition from the capitalist world system, based on hierarchies of nations, to a world socialist system, which cannot be made up of relatively isolated and autarkic 'socialist' nations. Here the true solidarity of the peoples involved in the struggle for reshaping the world comes to the fore, due to the limited prospects for*

*progress in the Third World where the conditions for transcending advanced capitalism express nothing more than the weakness of the forces of socialism at the centre of the system.* (ROAPE, 1974:20)

He regarded the China of the Cultural Revolution as addressing this issue and indeed although China developed in a way that Amin may not have foreseen there is some basis for the view that it did first ensure an autocentric development path, only engaging with global capitalism when it was in a strong position to do so. Insofar as Amin has a working model it appears to be that of China. He now sees China as an exporter of manufactured goods with cheap labour using foreign corporates and subcontracted local manufacturers while at the same time 'constructing a national integrated modern industrial system'. Very little of the rest of the periphery has not undergone this autocentric transformation.

Even if there were countries which tried in some way to follow an independent path – Nyerere's Tanzania with its policy of Socialism and Self-reliance, for example – they never broke or were allowed to break with the system of capital accumulation in which profits found their way to the developed economies of the 'Global North'. To the extent that African countries such as Tanzania adopted a self-styled 'socialist' approach to development, for Amin this meant an increased state involvement in the development of capitalism. If there was no national bourgeoisie to do it, then the State had to take on the job of accumulating and investing capital.

The contradictions of capitalism at the centre are being at least temporarily resolved in ways which inhibit the periphery even further from a socialist self-centred development. In the past four decades we have lived through the triumph and the crisis of neoliberalism, the global financial monopolisation of capital, the colonisation of the State by private capital principally by the privatisation of state assets, and the liberalisation of the labour market with stricter anti-union laws and transnational freedom of movement resulting in the suppression of wages

with the consequent increased social inequality and deprivation. African economies and the rest of peripheral capitalism have been ruthlessly subject to neoliberal policies which have made them even less able, even if willing, to pursue a self-centred path.

These developments are fundamentally a necessary reaction to the falling profit rates of the 1970s as wages, after pressure from organised labour, took an increasing share of the value of output. Capital's recovery of value from labour points to the central contradiction of capitalism that Amin set out: that the only way value can be realised in a mass consumption market is for the masses to have the power to consume. As consumers' incomes were squeezed under neoliberalism, this contradiction was resolved by increasing credit to consumers which led to the financial crash of 2007/8 and can only lead to another financial crash, which some believe is imminent. Underlying these developments is increased automation, computerisation and robotisation which reduces the need for physical labour, creates ever cheaper durable consumption goods and leads to a contradiction between technology and the way society is organised, or as Marx would have put it, between the productive forces and the relations of production. Samir Amin's later writings clearly recognised the changes that the world had seen since 1974 outlined above, but his conception of the period since 1974 as a long crisis of capitalism and his advocacy of peripheral countries 'de-linking' from the global economy do find their origin in his work four decades earlier. It is a mark of the power of his original insights that they are as relevant today as they were then.

Of course there are problems with his analysis. He himself lays out a capitalist centre which has all the cards and all the power and is adept at manipulating nation and class. It is also supported by a gigantic military and security machine with compliant governments around the globe and others whose loyalty is maintained by the supply of weaponry. Given Amin's deep analysis of the nature of modern capitalism in its new imperialist phase, what chance is there of effecting

any break with the system in such circumstances? Is capitalism sowing the seeds of its own destruction and are socialist forces ready to effect change as capitalism sinks under the weight of its own contradictions? Certainly not at the present. So we have to share Amin's irrepressible optimism. For he embodied that Gramscian trope 'pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will'. In one of the interviews cited here, he told how in the context of the Egyptian spring, on the walls of Cairo, *you can read in more places every day: 'The revolution has not changed the system but it has changed the people.' I think it's beautiful, and it means a lot to Egyptians. We are not going to stop. And what is interesting is that this is written during the day and removed by the police during the night. In the past, slogans were written during the night and removed by the police during the day. A small fact – very small, but quite indicative.* (Amin and Bush, 2014) ■

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