

Samir Amin and the New International Epistemological Order

Samir Amin: *Eurocentrism* (trans. Russel Moore, New York: Monthly Review Press 1989)

This recent product of Samir Amin's prolific and inspired intellectual labour is an integral supplement to his ongoing overall project of advancing the national-liberational goals of developmental autonomy from under the directives of global capitalism. Amin builds on a perspective deriving from Marx but corrected by the viewpoint of, and in view of, the periphery of that capitalism, which part of the world, as is well known, so much (and quite unfortunately, considering much of the later scholarly work conducted in his name) evaded the focus of the writings of Marx himself¹. This time only the subject of Amin's ambitious² and broadly informed scrutiny is the cultural counterpart corresponding to the prohibitive objective relations which constitute what he calls "actually existing capitalism".

As for Amin, Eurocentrism is the ideology (in the sense given first by Marx) of capitalism, serving the needs of legitimation of the existing order of affairs by obscuring the true nature of the capitalist relations and concealing the contradictions behind them. Therefore, in order to affect the needed (but not necessarily 'necessary' in any teleological sense) progressive sublation of the given exploitative and constraining modern circumstances, Amin embarks here in examining and debunking the cultural aspect of the imperialist dimension of capitalist expansion so as to move towards the indispensable double goal of "critical analysis and... the development of progressive strategies" (p. 141).

The unequal development which, for Amin, is the reality of actually existing capitalism is not based on any immanent necessity or inherent superiority of developmental factors endogenous in post-Renaissance Europe but rather draws on and exploits the artificially particular (but concealed as such) rationality of Eurocentric capitalism. It is not that universalism per se

1 See Amin's work e.g. In *Accumulation on World Scale, Unequal Development*, and the recent *Delinking* (New York, Monthly Review Press 1974, 1976 and Zed Press 1985 respectively).

2 Amin's ultimate aim is to contribute to the process of bringing about a "Total Reconstruction on a Global Scale" (Amin, *Eurocentrism*, p. 117; hereafter the page numbers given in the text refer to this work only).

is an untenable position; on the contrary, tells Amin, with capitalism we now have a real and novel:

twofold demand for universalism: first, at the level of the scientific analysis of society, that is to say, at the level of the discovery of universal laws that govern all societies; and second, at the level of the elaboration of a universal human project allowing the supersession of the historical limits of capitalism itself (p. 9).

The issue, then, is, as goes Amin's assertion, about "the false universalism of capitalist Eurocentrism" (p. 145): that we are rather running the risk of falling victim to a double deception of the uncritical acceptance of the basic tenets of Eurocentric axioms in both the Left and the Right in the Western political tradition: first, concerning the internal factors as considered primary in the comparative evolution of any society; and second, concerning the assumption of the generalizability of the Western-model capitalism on a global scale (p. 109). Consequently, this leads to the topical need to rebuke the distorting historicism ingrained in contemporary Western social thought (and its relativizing philosophical affines) and to contain its hybrid conceived in the potency of the capitalism of the transformed modern Europe: the hubristic solution to the question of the European "success" as imperialist universalism on an economic foundation.

Thus, we can see two broader meta-interests informing the matrix of Amin's more direct rebuttal of the Eurocentric prejudices behind the Western social-political traditions. On the one hand, there is an attempt to develop a reconstruction of history as an interpretation charged with critical-emancipatory potential. But not only is "the project of historical materialism... to reinterpret world history in light of a general theory of social evolution", it is also "to open the way for transcending capitalism by means of an efficacious political strategy" (p. 118). Amin's second concern is then a positive one, namely to develop a set of propositions attributable with the status of 'science', which could, for instance, take the shape of Amin's global theory of unequal development while the present work under consideration represents more intimately the former, more directly critical function³. And it is exactly here where his work goes beyond that of Martin Bernal's or Edward Said's "sectoral" critiques of Eurocentrism: he attempts

3. This bifold scholarly orientation probably reflects the inherited tension embedded in large portion of Marxist theory between on one the hand a critical outlook and on the other hand a 'scientific' (or "scientistic"); see Albrecht Wellmer, *Critical Theory of Society* (New York: Continuum 1971) strand of self-understanding, which tension is manifest in the complex inner development of Marx's own thought from his work under the influence of young Hegelians through the volumes of *Capital*.

to relate that cultural aspect in question to its overall context within the capitalist socio-economic formation.

My review follows Amin's own organization of argument: first, I will refer below to the central arguments he puts forth in the critical treatment of the historically developed "Eurocentric paradigm", and then my intention is to look at some of the aspects of his proposal for a 'science' in the service of humanistic socialist universalism before turning, as a practical-political endnote, to a brief discussion of Amin's exposition of social change. In the process, my thesis will emerge that while impressively undermining the conditions of maintenance of the historical innocence of capitalism's malleability and historicity at the core of "Eurocentrism", he nevertheless may never manage to fully transcend the very phenomenon he attacks at the level of epistemology, especially as concerns his rationalist outlook. As purported in this review, the underproblematization of the concept of rationality in Amin's book results in effect in a partial adoption of the inherited notion of Western rationality, or in only partial rejection of it, in his otherwise remarkable attempt to break through the confines of the occidental philosophical framework through a critique of culturalism, anchored in a considerably original utilization of the method of historical materialism.

Critique of Ideology

As already mentioned, Eurocentrism, for Amin, implies a twofold distorting prejudice or "provincial arrogance"; resulting in a theory of world history and a political project, it has generated a "false universalism" by assigning transhistorical significance or status to the conceived historical particularities and incommensurable histories. Such explanations have taken shape most conspicuously in namely culturalist and racist theses, turning historical-analytical queries concerning the rise of capitalism into mythical constructions about Hellenic-Christian logic of necessity.

Amin's book eruditely challenges these assumptions through three interconnected arguments each of which is linked to different functions of Eurocentrism. First, there is a critique through historical arguments. Offering an alternative interpretation via a reconstruction of an alternative distinct historical narrative in the light of historical data, Amin shows the historically unfounded and deforming "annexation of Greece by Europe" (p. 93) from its actual context in ancient Orient, carried out mainly during the renaissance and as of the 19th century Europe. Against such arbitrary reconstruction of false evolutionary identity in order "to blur the extent of [Europe's] rupture with the past through an affirmation of a nonexistent historical continuity" (p. xi) with the aim of furtherance of the claim for original transhistorical superiority of European capitalism, Amin can posit a different historical chronology that downplays the traditionally held global progressive

significance of the transition from tributarian antiquity to Christian feudalism in Europe. In the light of broad historical material, Amin locates the beginnings of Mediaeval culture earlier in the Hellenistic unification of the East. The qualitative more novel break of the emergent capitalism is thereby better situated and portrayed against the background of center-periphery analysis of the tributary era: Christianity cannot any longer hold the monopoly of plasticity among the world religions, and the European "success story" must be seen in light of the dynamic opened to it due to the peripheral position to which that continent was largely relegated during the fully developed tributary period.

The coincidence of the early development of capitalism and the construction of Eurocentric mythology point to the need for a second argument: Amin places Eurocentrism within the *history of ideology* (in a more Mannheimian sense) of capitalism. The analysis of the connection of Eurocentrism with the Renaissance thought associated with the development of the emergent economic system reveals the contribution of the former in concealing the systemic contradictions of the latter especially through the bourgeois science's search for partial truths.

Thirdly, a *conceptual exercise* uncovers the falsity of the Eurocentric cultural universalism in its internally contradictory character mentioned already earlier, through looking at the specific character of the construed unique traits vested now with transhistorical value (e.g. concerning the instrumental rationality of the economism of capitalism).

Science "for a truly universal culture"

While Eurocentrism functions to legitimize worldwide inequality and capitalism as a social system, it is nevertheless one response to "real questions" concerning the European origins of capitalism. "It is therefore necessary to replace it with correct positive responses" (P. x.). This, for Amin, means construction of a scientific theory to explain the historical development and dynamics of actually existing capitalism, which at the same time could provide for production of viable political strategies (this is what his theory of unequal development attempts to do). However, here the exact status of 'theory' is not clear; on the one hand, according to Amin, such theory with true universal aspirations cannot develop as long as ideology (in the Marxian sense) exists, but on the other hand, such theory, if I read Amin correctly, is needed for the dissolution of ideology. This ambiguity connects with the above-mentioned tension between theory as a critique and theory as a science, and points to the need to clarify the epistemological issues involved more in detail.

Amin's proposed 'science' rests on the concept of rationality, which is not clearly articulated in Amin's text. We know the Eurocentric charge of the universalist claim of the instrumental rationality of bourgeois economics,

in the light of its development in the long trajectory of world history. A theory of history must also be able to account for the "laws of power and politics" so notably predominant in the era of tributary cultures. With Amin, it seems that these two, instrumental and strategic aspects of rationality combined, it is possible to discover the "general law governing the evolution of all segments of humanity" (p. 115), especially so now that capitalism has created the objective conditions for universalization on the basis of its homogenizing tendencies. On the basis of the old Marxist doctrine of the determination "in the last instance" of the economic base - for Amin "at the highest level of abstraction" (p. 3) - "the discovery of universal laws that govern all societies" becomes possible (p. 9). Presumably, it is then the predictive capacity of the knowledge of those laws that makes the formulation of strategies for non-capitalist paths of development possible.

More precisely, the analysis of the functions of cultural constructions reveals their basic determination by the reproductive needs of the system, at least "in the last instance"; for example, "medieval scholasticism was an expression of the need to adapt Islam to a tributary system extending over a vast integrated space" (p. 52), and in the capitalist revolution, "the mission (or religion) is reinterpreted in conformity with the demands of the new society" (p. 72) whereby it becomes "easy... to see the relationship between (the) revision of intellectual priorities and the demands of the development of the forces of production" (p. 79).

The possible conclusiveness and exhaustive stature of analytical statement of this kind leads one to hark back to Marx, whose explanation of social action, as Wellmer⁴ has shown, betrays a reductivist concept of rationality which is not able to sufficiently reconcile interaction with labour, but, in effect, collapses the former into the latter. Consequently, the concept of rationality which forms the basis of Amin's ability to formulate an empirical-analytical theory of social change with predictive capacity to guide strategical political orientation (which is thus to be nothing less than "efficacious", namely a causally calculable means to the desired ends) rests itself on an insufficient understanding of action-oriented rationality which, not least in the tradition stemming from "spontaneous" Greek materialism through enlightenment and positivist "naturalism".

Moreover, the absence of what could be designated as the communicative element or aspect of reason from Amin's conceptual apparatus leaves him dependent on the inherited understanding of rationality in his critical reconstruction of the historical nature of the constituted Eurocentrism of capitalist thought.

4 Op. cit.

This amounts to a rationalist standpoint perhaps beyond the authorization of history itself. In order to critically juxtapose the historical record so as to demonstrate the timebound constitution of the process leading to the modern order of affairs, to strip the Eurocentric natural appearance of "things", and to offer a non-determinist explanation of the "capitalist success" and thus avail the transition beyond the current economic system, Amin must demonstrate the non-essentialist nature of elements of also non-Western cultures through application of ultimately Western criteria of the factors of evolutionary progress so as to be able to maintain the historical significance of differential historical-conjunctural conditions such as the relative dynamic impetus of center/periphery positions; thus it is for example not that Christianity alone contained the elements for progressive reason but that they were there, at least in principle, in Eastern religions, too - only they developed less flexible in the full-blown culture of the center⁵. Amin's critical import, then, reads ultimately that there was nothing *immanent* in the achievement of the current historical state of the West, and all claims to the contrary are false; and that from the point of view of the contemporary periphery, the centralized system now in force is not desirable and must be overcome. What is lacking in Amin's account is a radical critique in itself of the concept of rationality which is allowed to determine in its turn the concepts of development and progress, and this is so at the expense of harnessing history in the service of the rationalist agenda of providing the foundations for science for a true universalism.

It seems to me that such an agenda is an obstacle for developing a truly radical critique based on alternative (if perhaps counterfactual) forms of life, as long as the concept of rationality that underlies the normative exercise is ultimately founded on the premisses of the human conditions of existence in power and labour only - and this is what Amin indeed seems to do. Avoiding the problems concerning the foundations of critique may become arduous then, as far as the scientific pretensions of the critique are concerned (but, of course, will not so insofar as human action in reality does consist of domination and work only). And, the rift away from Eurocentrism on the basis of Amin's theory of unequal development may not transcend

5 Here one might, for instance, find reason to object to the relative importance assigned to Averroes as a great Islamic metaphysical rationalist and initiator of "incipient 'Protestant revolution' in Islam" (p. 44), in spite of his significant participation in for example the Mediaeval exchange on physics with Avicenna and Maimonides on Aristotelean "orderly heavens in their disorderliness" as well as his later influence on Mediaeval *particularly Islamic* figure, rather than a Hellenic cosmopolitan. Likewise, his activities in "inventing" figurative interpretation of Islamic texts should perhaps be seen as rather marginally indicative, specifically so within the context of Arab-Islamic thought itself; interpretation of texts as such is relatively alien to Islam and belongs rather to the tradition of Christianity.

the limits of the paradigm as it ultimately remains within the established boundaries of Western traditions of political and social thought. Supported with the categories of the dominant Western scholarly language, Amin can only call for redistributive justice within the existing order of appraised evolutionary/progressive feasibility: polycentric development can be seen as a call for acceptance of several paths towards the same ultimate goal, the development of productive forces, though getting there better: enhancing equality and justice. As what this demand requires is an intransystemic disposal of privileges of being designated as a rightful mode of doing the same thing through extension of purely economist criteria of capitalist thought to include also the "populist-national" or socialist action, it becomes possible to see it conferring the critique the status of, to borrow Bourdieu's terminology, *heterodoxy* only, not fundamentally challenging the existence of *doxa*, or the internalized limits of the prevailing system of thought⁶. Thus, one can raise the question concerning what exactly it is in Amin's work, in which we are facing a powerful and concerted effort to divest the legitimacy of the justification of the existing order, that guarantees that it, however, will not add up in effect to not much more than another new redistributive moral order between the West and the rest.

Politics and Social Change

One of Amin's thrusts in the book is that no capitalist stage is necessary for transition to socialism. This argument is based on the concept of international value which substitutes Marx's original labour theory of value as the main tool in critical analysis: according to Amin, the central contradiction of actually existing capitalism is spatially based in nature rather than class-based between labour and capital. Historical materialist approach to history shows that confronted with the polarizing tendency of expanding capitalist relations which nevertheless prove incapable of fulfilling what has been called the historical task of capitalism:

the calling into question of the capitalist mode of social organization is more deeply felt as an objective necessity at the periphery of the system than at its center (p. 10).

In cultural analysis, this "backwardness advantage" of greater ideological flexibility of less perfected development has been shown in historical record: Europe was the periphery of Arab-Islamic center, Japan occupied a similar position vis-à-vis China. Therein lies also the contemporary periphery's prospect for possibilities of "delinking", on the cultural level, from the "false universalism" of global capitalist economy for "populist national

6 See Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Praxis* (Cambridge Univ. Press 1977).

development", to rearrange again later under "recomposed superior socialist universalism", as Amin puts it (p. 145).

While this invests the periphery with a capable propensity for action, as compared for example with some other global theories of capitalism such as Wallerstein's or Frank's, it is not clear precisely how the 'populist' side of development is to be conceptualized, in so far as the conceptual apparatus utilized remains oriented to understanding of instrumental and strategic action only. Amin is able to point out the needed national strategy on the level of the international order, but since he seems to lack any adequate concept of interaction, or communicative rationality, he, as it seems, cannot account for how exactly this delinking for socialist development is to come about in reality to the extent that it is to avoid statist overcomes; for example, how 'development' is to be realized as a social struggle/process. I suspect that Marx was not at all unaware of such problematic concerning social movements: in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, he makes the note on the class or group formation in discussing the economic situation of the peasantry which goes beyond the formal mechanism normally associated with Marxist class analysis:

*In so far as these small peasant proprietors are merely connected on a local basis, and the identity of their interests fails to produce a feeling of community, national links, or political organization, they do not form a class*⁷.

Conclusion

Amin's book presents an attractive and sophisticated argument for its case, to the complexity of which this review cannot do justice. It is capable of recognizing and explaining on, the contradictions of historical process, while not falling prey to teleological determinism of so much of Marxist literature. In doing so, the modified historical materialist theory of unequal development is a valuable tool, which breaks out of Eurocentrism in two respects: first, it attempts to incorporate a theory of culture, thereby being able to avoid the 'victimization' to passivity of the capitalist periphery as accounted above; and secondly, by analysis of "actually existing capitalism" which is liberated from the crass evolutionism of much of theorizing on socialist development through the possibility of socialist transformation in the periphery by delinking for a polycentric world of development.

Moreover, the critical force of Amin's informed historical argument "deconstructs" the arrogant and arbitrary universalism of Eurocentric

7 This translation quoted in William Roseberry, "From Peasant Studies to Proletarianization Studies", In *Studies in Comparative International Development* 18:1 & 2 (1983) (emphasis added).

capitalism, while rightly pointing to the present need to provide foundations for a novel kind of universalism. However, it is my contention that such universalism cannot be ultimately based on the homogenizing tendency of capitalist expansion, but must seek other grounding in order to avoid misrepresentation and limited conceptualization of human action. It is here that the greatest problem arises: it can perhaps be seen as a continuation of the essential and contested latent tension in Marx's thought between the self-understanding of theory as a critique and as a positive science that the positive aspirations of Amin's book never seem to radically depart from their embeddedness in an epistemological framework basically still within the influence of Eurocentric experience.

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