Challenging the Eurocentric View of History

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Global History: A View from the South
by Samir Amin
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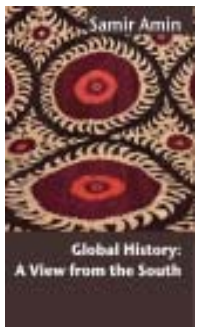
Samir Amin has written extensively on the political economy of the world's economic spheres in terms of their relations with global capitalism from a Marxian standpoint. One recalls earlier works, such as *Unequal Development* (1973), *Unequal Exchange and the Law of Value* (1973), *Eurocentrism* (1988), and *Obsolescent Capitalism* (2003). Though Amin's writings are inspired by Marxism, he is not a mere ideological fellow-traveler. In this regard, Amin has this to say: 'My work has never been that of a Marxologue. I have repeated many times that, for me, to be a Marxist is to start from Marx and not to stop with him, or with his main successors (Lenin, Mao), the builders of historical Marxism' (p. 4). Amin claims that his most important conclusion has been to formulate a 'law of globalised value' that is 'consistent with the essentials of the law of value particular to capitalism and discovered by Marx on the one hand, and with the realities of an unequal globalised development on the other' (p. 4). It is the study of how capitalism creates unequal development in its global scope, all derived from the fundamental law of value that characterises most of Amin's work.

Global History: A View from the South is a collection of six essays that explores Amin's basic ideas on the law of globalised value and offers a critical analysis of the received Eurocentric doctrine of the progression from the earliest forms of human economic and sociological organisation to the present-day forms of capitalism. In the chapter titled 'Ancient World Systems vs Capitalist World System', Amin argues against the schematic rule that human sociological development in history must follow the 'five stages paradigm', according to which human societies necessarily progress through the stages of slavery, feudalism, capitalism, socialism, then communism. As he put it: 'I have rejected the supposedly Marxist version of five stages. More precisely I refuse: 1) to regard slavery as a necessary stage through which all societies that are more "advanced" have passed; 2) to regard feudalism as the necessary stage succeeding slavery'(p. 13). Amin also questions and rejects what he sees as a Eurocentric convention in formulating the developmental path from pre-capitalist tributary forms to capitalism. The conventional thesis is that it is only European forms of 'slavery-to-feudalism' that could lead eventually to capitalism while Asiatic tributary modes were destined for ultimate stagnation (p. 13). Amin's point is that the 'tributary mode of production', which he replaces with 'tributary society' on account of the diverse sociological elements that he fits into his model in both its European and Asiatic forms, encompassed within itself all the ingredients necessary to make the transition from tributary modes of production to the qualitatively different capitalist mode of production. It was the contingent historical event of the European expansion into the Americas and the fact that there was a dynamic antagonistic relationship between the peasantry and the feudal ruling groups in the European tributary mode of production that led to the development of capitalism. In Asia, the relationship between landlord and serf was much more stable, as in the case of China (pp. 163-165). According to Amin, it is this distinction that explains the difference in developmental paths for both China and the West. In the West, capitalist accumulation proceeds by dispossession, in this instance the dispossession of workers, while this did not occur in China (p. 163).



For Amin himself, the tributary world system distinguishes itself from the capitalist system in that, in the former, the surplus is realised as a tribute while in the latter it appears as the profit of capital or 'the rent of dominant oligopolistic capital' (p. 161). In the former case, the levying process is transparent. According to Amin: 'it is the free work of the subjugated peasants on the land of the nobles and a proportion of the harvest creamed off by the latter or by the State' (p. 162). Such tribute usually takes a non-monetary form while profit making in the capitalist mode of production is 'opaque as it results from the way the network of trade in monetarised goods operates: wages of wokers, purchases and sales of the means of production and the results of economic activities' (p. 162).

According to Amin, the pre-capitalist tributary systems were all sufficiently structured in terms of large scale organisation and surplus extraction; in this regard, he lists three major world tributary systems – Europe-Middle East, India, and China – that were dominant from 300 BC to 1500 AD. I argue that Amin is remiss in excluding from this list the tributary systems of the three expansive African empires, the Ghana-Mali-Songhay complex. The same principles of tributary society hold in this instance. The medieval kings of this expansive area all had large numbers of workers and other individuals from whom tribute was extracted. The monetary expenditures of Mansa Musa and the Askias, emperors of Mali, are good examples. The same argument could be made with regard to the classification of the earlier tributary systems into the Middle East, India, and China. Egypt is not just the Middle East – a Eurocentric construction – but Africa proper with its roots to the South and culturally cognate with Kush and contiguous areas (p. 41). So, the early roots of the tributary system are also found in Africa. Amin would no doubt appreciate these observations given his noted critique of Eurocentrism. He does point out, though, in the chapter titled 'Central Asia and the Middle East' that 'Sub-Saharan Africa [admittedly a Eurocentric construction] was not as Arabic writings show a periphery that was more miserable than before the 11th century' (p. 58).

In examining the world's historic tributary systems, Amin's goal is to point out that Europe's developmental trajectory was in no way exceptional to those found elsewhere. In fact, Asia and the Middle East were more advanced in terms of global trade-reach than Europe itself. In the context of his critique of Eurocentrism, I have pointed out that large scale tributary systems did exist in Africa both in its early roots and from the period 300 BC to 1500 AD.

One of the goals of the critics of capitalism from a global perspective has been to show that the conventional analyses have been structured on foundations of what has been called Eurocentrism. Amin elaborates on this theme in his acclaimed work, *Eurocentrism*. Yet there are other theorists who have argued that any version of world economic development that structures events on a linear-ascending path is in itself Eurocentric. This is the case with Andre Gunder Frank. Frank's thesis – as expounded by Amin in the chapter titled 'History Conceived as an Eternal Cycle' – is that world history marches on in an eternal circle and has always been global 'in the sense that the evolution of the various regions has never been determined by the interaction of forces internal to the societies in question but by forces operating on the global system, and that, consequently, all efforts to write the history of a region of the world (Europe, China, or any other region) can only be illusory, since there is only one history, that of the one and only world system' (p. 120).

The result of this is that, according to Frank, 'This world system has fundamentally remained the same ever since, and that consequently, successive modes or phases (such as those initiated in 1500 and 1800) do not exist and that the attempt to mark out qualitatively different phases based, for example, on successive modes of production, is, as a result misleading …. This world history evolves in a cyclical manner' (p. 120).

According to this thesis, areas such as China, India, and the Middle East were dominant until the start of the 19th century when those areas yielded place to the West on account of the then prevailing Asian crisis. Amin argues in response to this approach that the development of a qualitatively different capitalism in the West negates this single global system approach; to take this position does not in any way incur Eurocentrism. Amin's counter-thesis is that 'capitalism and the world capitalist system did bring something new and do not constitute in any way an extension of previous systems' (p. 129). His answer is that 'the capitalist mode of production is not a method of production technologically defined by the use of machines, but also social life in all its ramifications. The capitalist mode of production represents a qualitative break with the system that preceded it (p. 130). Capitalism, for Amin, is qualitatively different from previous systems on account of its founding on the 'law of value' which maximally determines social relations. As he put it: 'The law of value controls not only economic life, but the entire social system of the modern (capitalist) world' (p. 130).

The capitalist system is also unique in that on account of its great productive capacity it contains the seeds of its own destruction. Amin, noting Wallerstein's observation that 'exponential growth is cancerous' (p. 130), argues that 'capitalism must be replaced by a qualitatively new system subjecting the development of productive forces to a controlled social logic and no longer to the sole mechanical logic of the alienated economy' (p. 130). This is the logic of Amin's critique of capitalism. It is a system in which wealth determines social power, unlike previous systems where power determines wealth; and it is also a system whose unquenchable appetite for growth eventually leads to periodic crisis. This is so because growth must come at the expense of the profits garnered from labour, which in turn is the supposed beneficiary of growth itself.

This brings us to Amin's views on the pressing contemporary issue of globalisation. Globalisation is the specific form of contemporary capitalism which can be defined as a universal market which has spread far and wide to trade in goods, services, and capital. It is dominated by huge multinational firms financed by large banks holding great amounts of capital. As is obvious, globalisation is dominated by the capitalist North with its dominant stock exchanges and other capitalist paraphernalia. Briefly put, the goal of globalisation is to bring all the resources of the globe under the purview of the giant capitalist machine. In his analysis, Amin examines globalisation as an instantiation of historical capitalism. There are interesting points offered in relation to the development of global

capitalism by way of Marx and Braudel. Braudel, as per Amin, describes capitalist reality as having three sociological layers: 1) the social base, 2) the market, and 3) the anti-market where politics enters the fray and distorts the market (p. 73). Amin argues that there are limitations in Marx in his analysis of capitalist production that does not equip Marxians to fully understand the expansion into its globalist mode (p. 78). Braudel's analysis, which offers a more comprehensive examination from the level of the anti-market, is better equipped to understand the morphing of capitalism into its globalised form.

The structural weakness of contemporary capitalism as globalisation is exposed by Amin's analysis of the system as increasingly dependent on 'financialisation', according to which huge amounts of capital are traded with interest in the marketplace without being attached to any real production output. Amin writes: '…globalisation serves to dismantle the national social contracts produced through centuries of social struggle without providing any significant replacement on either a global or regional scale (on the scale of the European Union for instance) (p. 111). I interject a simple explanation here: with globalisation comes increasing competition, diminishing returns from investments in the form of the falling rate of profits, hence the increased exploitation of labour which eventually leads to recession and depression, as was the case in 2008. According to Amin: 'the depression is expressed by the enormous growth in the surpluses of capital which cannot find any profitable outlet in the expansion of the productive system. The major, perhaps even exclusive, preoccupation of the dominant powers is to find financial outputs for these surpluses in order to avoid the catastrophe (for the system) of their massive evaluation' (p. 111).

The result of all this is increasing deregulation, high interest rates, privatisation, increasing income inequality, increasing third world debt, and a regressionary cycle (p. 112). All this is done to satisfy the perpetual need of capital to maximize profits. But in this instance, populations at the periphery bear the brunt of the problem with increasing unemployment. The reason is that international capital prefers operating in areas where investment in new infrastructures is minimal and the division of labour is advanced. The capitalist system is in perpetual crisis. Amin's solution is an optimistic one: 'the prospect of another social system, abandoning the sacrosanct institution of private property, and of another globalisation, rejecting polarization, remains the only alternative' (p. 112). The control of market capitalism as a prelude to the creation of a global socialism is what Amin has in mind. One must be optimistic in the face of obstacles because the capitalist 'law of accumulation' has within it its very negation (p. 118).

But there is no strict linear path in this human struggle to eliminate the ravages of capital according to the laws of value and accumulation. History can be pure contingency, dependent often on the vagaries of geography. Amin uses this binary explanatory nexus of history and geography to explain the problematic of the transformations that took place in the former Soviet Union and China from the 1980s onward. World system theory (Braudel, Wallerstein *et al*.) puts some emphasis on geography as of historical contingencies. For Amin, the fact that Russia first sought to deal directly with the problems of capitalism before the more advanced capitalist countries is an instance in which geography, more than the schemas of historical Marxism, plays a key role. He argues that these two countries tried to make the break with capitalism because the system was weakest at such places even though they were not truly peripheral.

Amin's collection of essays is useful in that they engage the reader with a critique of the orthodox Marxian Eurocentric formulas concerning the progression of human society over time. He not only rejects the five-stage developmental theory but also raises questions about the idea that Asiatic modes of production were structurally incapable of progressing to capitalism. But, as I have argued above, the world tributary systems should not be restricted to just the Middle East, China and India; these systems should also include the medieval African states of Ghana, Mali, Songhay, and arguably those of the pre-Columbian Americas.

I must also take issue with Amin's characterisation of the qualitative difference between capitalism and its precedent, reduced mainly to the relationship between power and capital. I want to believe that what establishes the specificity of capitalism has been its capacity to introduce technological change when necessary. This is due to the competition between capitalist enterprises and the constant pressure from labour in terms of wages and productivity. This capacity for technological change easily translates into the technological tools of warfare and a general advantage over other cultures. The text in general is indeed a view from the South.