

Samir Amin was a Personnage

We used to have a word to speak of a big person. That word was personage. Samir was a personage. Personages leave behind a mixed legacy, and make possible a mixed following in their wake. It is often premature to sum up their legacy soon after their demise. All we can do is to begin the process of summing up.

I will confine myself to Samir's intellectual legacy. Samir's doctoral thesis, the multi-volume *Accumulation on a World Scale*, written on a vast canvass, presented an outline agenda, one that Samir spent a life time filling and fulfilling.

Samir was so prolific that I wonder if there is anyone who can claim to have read all his works. I thought I would take up the task when I first met him in 1975 in Dar-es-Salaam, so impressed was I with his erudition and clear reasoning. But I was never equal to it. Samir was the sprinter, and I felt like his shadow. I persisted for a few years, until life intervened in 1979. Idi Amin was overthrown and we, the exiles, returned home. For several years, I put aside Samir Amin the scholar and began to listen to Samir the activist.

Among his writings, there were two which came closest to taking up the challenge formulated in *Accumulation*. The first was *Eurocentrism* and the second *Unequal Development*.

I have taught *Eurocentrism* at least ten times over the past two decades. Every time, I am amazed at the world historical grasp that informed its author. Samir was more a man of

Mahmood Mamdani
Makerere Institute of Social
Research / Uganda
Columbia University
Uganda/USA

history than a man who we could identify with a particular place. The places that most come to mind are Cairo, Dakar and Paris. Even if Samir moved between them, he was a moving target, a man of no fixed abode. His life resembled that of Marx, a man without a homeland, but one whose home was a chosen commitment to a historical project. Like Marx, Samir was a man of a fixed time, the modern. I remember being struck by Samir's critique of Edward Said's politically important work, *Orientalism*. Samir objected to what he considered a trans-historical critique. He argued that Said should have focused his critique not on an ahistorical discourse of Western culture, as if it were timeless, but on the discourse of Western modernity. I believe Samir was the first to formulate this critique, which has since been repeated over and again by many others.

Samir is, of course, best known for his works on dependency theory, even though he thought of his own writing as grounded firmly in Marxism rather than in dependency theory. But the fact is that Samir introduced an entire generation of young scholars, myself included, may be even two, to think of underdevelopment in historical terms. The work I found truly compelling was *Unequal Development*, and its

companion volume, *De-connexion*. One gave a historical account of the present, the other charted a way forward.

The test of theory lies in practice. Not long after his expulsion from Paris, Marx jotted down several theses on Feurbach. The second of these reads: "The question whether human thought achieves objective truth is not a question of theory but a *practical* question ... Dispute over the actuality or nonactuality of any thinking that isolates itself from praxis is a purely scholastic question." If I was asked to choose a single statement by Marx that likely summed up Samir's quest, it would be this.

I recall Samir telling us (but then maybe it was Thandika recounting Samir) of when he received a call from Thomas Sankara asking him to travel urgently to Bourkina Faso to discuss a challenge. On arrival, Samir was told by Sankara: "You have told us that we must have the courage to de-connect. Before we could gather that courage, the French have taken the lead and de-connected us. What shall we do?" Samir was flummoxed. He admitted to us: "I had not imagined that the question of de-connection would first arise with a country as poor as Bourkina Faso." It seemed to illustrate a practical dilemma: we know that whereas prescriptive formulas – as short and succinct as 'de-connexion' – seem to apply to one and all without discrimination or difference, yet each case is different and so are the consequences of the application. It seemed to raise

a problem similar to that faced by the Russian Revolution: how was one to achieve 'socialism in a single country,' in this case 'de-connexion of a single country'?

I thought the story pointed to a broader issue. The objective conclusions of structuralism appear less convincing when bathed in a historical perspective. Although I never had an opportunity to discuss this with Samir, I thought the history of the past few decades raised a central question for dependency theory, and its conclusion that there can be no 'development' in the context of an imperialist-dominated world. Where is the theory to account for the emergence of China as the new economic challenge to the only super-power, the United States? And of others around the corner, such as India and Brazil, all with a colonial past and without a socialist present?

The debate over CODESRIA's overwhelming orientation to political economy theoretically and its pointing to a state-led growth model in practice came to a head at the 1984 General Assembly. It led to the initiation of a new multinational research group on social movements and democracy.

Samir walked on two legs, to use a Maoist phrase, constantly moving from theory to practice and back. The political economist in him was constantly put to task by his continuing engagement in real life politics. I thought his most difficult moment came with the Arab Spring in Egypt. We disagreed on political Islam several times. The first was decades ago at a CODESRIA working group on the gender question: there were some 6 of us, among them Samir, Marie Angelique, Zen, and myself. I recall Samir being firmly and totally opposed to political Islam of any hue: he said it was socially regressive on the gender

question, and its *laissez faire* economic thought went no further than philanthropy. The debate resurfaced at the 1991 Symposium on Academic Freedom in Kampala, except this time as a debate on democracy. How were we to think of the past century of state-enforced secularism against the reality of ethnic and religious mobilizations in society?

Samir's was single-minded, a man with conviction, focus and determination. He wanted clear sight of the enemy and a clear choice between alternatives. But the Arab Spring gave no such easy alternative. The alternative it did pose was between a military-led secularism and a Muslim Brothers-led parliamentary democracy. The pursuit of secularism led to a military coup. The debate, which had been rife in CODESRIA for over a quarter century, flared once again at the last General Assembly.

Political Islam is today divided between two major tendencies: both are socially reactionary and economically free market-oriented. The difference between them is political: one tendency – illustrated by Daesh and al Qaeda, supported by Saudi Arabia and the Emirates, with the US fully complicit – calls for a top down armed struggle. The other champions a parliamentary road. More of a bottom-up approach, it reflects the actual historical experience of Turkey and Iran. The stakes are becoming clearer as global consequences of the Saudi-led Wahhabi mobilization against Muslim Brothers become evident.

Samir was a thinker and he was a public intellectual. This founding father of CODESRIA was determined that it must not become just another donor-funded collection of individual or small team researchers, indulgently watered like so many potted plants in green houses. CODESRIA, he was convinced,

must remain open to sound and fury, wind and rain, storm and lightening. It must, above all, provide a home to discuss the issues central to the future of African peoples. In the absence of a real African parliament, it must function like one. This is why, even when one disagreed with Samir, one learnt from him. He was indeed a *Mwalimu*, a big tree under whose shelter many thrived – and without whose shade, we are sure to be tested over and again.

Samir came of intellectual age during an era when the battle was for independence, when we understood independence in terms of state sovereignty and decolonization of the economy. But success along this road has posed new challenges: central among them is that of extreme violence. It calls on us to think of the underside of state sovereignty, but without letting go of the gains of independence. This challenge calls on us to broaden and deepen our understanding of political modernity and to critically think the notion of sovereignty at the heart of it. Only such an endeavor will make it possible for us to develop a richer and a deeper understanding of decolonization.

As I said at the outset, the legacy of a great life is always a mixed one. Always contradictory, it points to different possibilities. It is at no point a closed book. Rather, it opens the doors to a great debate. Let us honor Samir Amin by not treating his thought as limited to his life, as if to close the book.

Let CODESRIA remain a great house of debate, in words that Samir liked to quote, 'let a hundred flowers bloom,' even if that involves the risk of having to deal with some weeds.

Let us celebrate the life of Samir Amin by daring to think like him and beyond him!