A Tribute to a Fighter against Global Capitalism

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'We are thus at the point where in order to open up a new field for the expansion of capital (modernization of agricultural production) it would be necessary to destroy - in human terms - entire societies. Twenty million efficient producers (fifty million human beings including their families) on one side and five billion excluded on the other. The constructive dimension of this operation represents no more than one drop of water in the ocean of destruction that it requires. I can only conclude that capitalism has entered its declining senile phase; the logic, which governs the system, is no longer able to assure the simple survival of half of humanity. Capitalism has become barbaric, directly calling for genocide. It is now more necessary than ever to substitute for it other logics of development with a superior rationality.'

'Liberal Virus: Permanent War and the Americanization of the World', p. 34

With these words, Samir Amin was pointing to the choices before humanity. These were either one of expropriation of small farmers and later genocidal destruction or one where there was transformation of relations between humans. In the second and preferable alternative, humans would struggle to transcend capitalism to the point where there would be a new impetus for agricultural transformation where agriculture and forestry will provide for the wellbeing of billions of humans on planet earth. While acknowledging that the future transformation of agriculture was a 'complex and multi-dimensional problem' for humans, Samir Amin recognised that this task of transforming agriculture required new political alliances to break the present international division of labour. This vision is one where in the bio-economy of the 21st century, agriculture and forestry will 'become new and lasting motors of the economy' and a major source of new employment. Samir Amin was offering a vision of a new global system that integrated humans rather than excluding them.

The vision of another social system 'abandoning the sacrosanct institution of private property' has been at the core of the intellectual work of Samir Amin for six decades. Born in Egypt on 3 September 1931, Amin was well aware of the stability of the agricultural sector for thousands of years. Egypt represented a society where the national formation had survived thousands of years of invasion and Amin brought to the world insights from the struggles of this society where the devastating consequences of integration into the capitalist system had brought poverty and misery for millions in that society. Now as we celebrate the 80th birthday of this African revolutionary, the revolutionary upheavals in Egypt and the counter-revolution in Libya points to the sharpening of the lines as the struggles intensify. As one component of this celebration of the life of Samir Amin, Pambazuka is also launching the Samir Amin Award so that readers and the Pambazuka audience can pay tribute to the extraordinary contribution of Samir Amin. Throughout his rich life, Amin wrote and acted to strengthen effective forms of popular power and the ideas that could give coherence to that popular power. For Samir Amin, that idea was the idea of socialism and he has been a contributor to ideas of transformation to a new mode of politics and economics for six decades.

Refining Historical Materialism?

Samir Amin can rightly be considered one of the foremost theoreticians of Marxism in the 20th century. In the 21st century, he continues to explain the systemic crisis of capitalism and the potentialities for incredible violence if humans did not struggle for a better world. Hailing from a society at the head of the Nile river that stood at the crossroads of three continents (Africa, Asia and Europe), Amin was able to grasp the strengths and weaknesses of differing forms of human organisation over centuries and he used the method of historical materialism to educate students of the paths that were possible before humanity. It is with this tool of analysis that Samir Amin continuously exposes the 'idea of a self-regulating market'. Today it is urgent for those aspiring for social change to grasp the importance of the tools of the method of historical materialism in order to come to grips with the dangers that lurk behind the current economic crisis. Although

North American universities have been afraid of the theoretical contributions of Karl Marx and historical materialism, it would be useful in the midst of this moment of uncertainty for students to read Samir Amin's essay on 'The Challenge of Globalization' where he sought to extend this tool of analysis by being up front with some of its deficiencies (especially as this analysis related to nature and gender) in order to debunk what he calls 'liberal utopianism.'

Throughout the post-colonial period after World War II, most of the significant forces for change (China, Vietnam, Cuba, Guinea, Zanzibar, Mozambique and South Africa) sought to grasp the core progressive tenets of Marxism, class struggles, the historical method and historical materialism and revolutionary change. Historical materialism has been a tool of analysis that seeks to understand material economic forces as the foundation on which sociopolitical institutions and ideas are constructed. In short, how do we understand the real dynamics of exploitation and domination within capitalism? In the world of austerity measures where workers are called upon to sacrifice and bankers are subsidised, there is a great need for the present generation to construct the theoretical base for grasping the social struggles in society that can assist us in making a break from seeking to understand history from the actions of great persons or the unseen hand of the market. Throughout his contributions, from the time he published his book 'Accumulation on a World Scale', Samir Amin has been using the historical materialist method of analysis to clarify the pitfalls of what he calls 'bourgeois economics'. Amin for decades had critiqued the 'vulgar and mechanistic' conceptions of 'stages of economic growth' that had been crafted as an anti-communist manifesto at the height of the Cold War. He wrote in the introduction of the book 'Global History: A View from the South' that 'I had already formulated a radical critique three years before Walt Rostow presented his thesis. But since then "development economics" preached by the main institutions responsible for development interventions (the World Bank, cooperation programmes and universities) have never gone beyond this nonsense' (p. 3).

It is this methodological clarity and consistency of exposing the nonsense of Western 'development' theories, which placed Samir Amin in a position to continuously clarify the massive fraud involved in the various development projects of the imperial overlords and the current version that is called the Millennium Development Goals. Re-reading Samir Amin today helps us to understand how after 50 years of the Pearson Report, (Partners for Development), the Brandt Report (to end poverty and hunger), numerous World Bank Development Reports, the MDG goals and the Blair Commission for Africa, the people of Africa are poorer and more exploited than they were in 1960.

In the present crisis of capitalism, a materialist conception of history allows us to understand that the current financial crisis is only a microcosm of the deeper structural crisis of capitalism. In the words of Samir Amin, 'This is not just a financial crisis which started with the breakdown of the financial system in September 2008. The financial crisis is itself the result of a long, a deep crisis that started long before, around 1975 with as of that time, unemployment, poverty, inequality, having grown continuously. And this real crisis of really existing capitalism has been overcome by financialisation of the system and the financialisation of the system has been the Achilles heel of the system.'

Today for young people to understand the reality where bankers are subsidised while millions die of hunger, it is necessary to grasp the nature of economic relations and the power of the capitalist classes. In the book 'The Liberal Virus: Permanent War and the Americanization of the World', Samir Amin used the method of historical materialism to outline the foundations of US liberalism and its roots in European liberalism. It is the clarity of this method, which allows the younger reader to understand that one leader such as Barack Obama, cannot stop the project to dominate the world through military force. What Samir Amin has done using Marxist methodology is to further our understanding of the particularities of US capitalism with its genocidal past that has developed certain features of liberal ideology in a new and uniquely dangerous way.

Maturation in a Time of War, Recovery and Liberation

Samir Amin had been a student in Europe (Paris 1947–57) and was party to a moment of great intellectual ferment. Humanity had been seeking to understand the ideas and economic conditions that had ushered in fascism and war, and the forces of decolonisation had seized the political and intellectual initiative after 1945. Yet within Western Europe Samir Amin witnessed the betrayal of the Algerian struggles by the French Communist Party and the dominant parties of the European left. Samir Amin had returned to Egypt at the height of the populism of Abdel Nasser (a year after the Suez Crisis) when the convergence of Pan-Africanism and Pan-Arabism had offered radical possibilities for the peoples of Africa and the Middle East in laying the foundation for real independence. After working for three years from 1957 to 1960 as a research officer in the bureaucracy in Egypt,

Samir Amin grasped the limitations of populist nationalism and moved to work with the anti-colonial forces in Africa. After working in Mali, Samir Amin moved to Dakar, Senegal, and he has been associated with the intellectual and political work of progressive African causes for over 40 years.

If one had not been told than Amin received his doctorate in economics and statistics, one would have been forgiven for thinking of him as a historian given his breadth of knowledge of world history. This breadth comes across in the more than 30 books and thousands of journal articles and opinion pieces. In one such book, recently published by Pambazuka Press, 'Global History: A View from the South', Amin takes the reader through the history of 'Central Asia and the Middle East' and 'Europe and China' while recapitulating the real meaning of modern imperialism that was being presented as 'globalisation'. From the introduction of this book, Samir Amin deconstructed two themes that have been central to his thinking: a) the so-called development economics; and b) the vulgar discussion of 'markets'. These two issues have been the basis of a massive fraud against the majority of the citizens of the planet. This fraud persists with the promise of 'progress' for societies that embrace neoliberalism.

Insights into the Tributary Mode of Production

The linear conceptions of 'progress' and 'development' were not only the fixation of the liberal wing of bourgeois economists such as Walt Rostow; there was a similar linearity of Marxists who believed that all societies must pass through the same stages that Europe had traversed. This was the stages theory of history of European Marxists. In his effort to go beyond the nonsense of 'development economics', Samir Amin has been seeking to link the theory and practice of human emancipation in a way that would illuminate the limitations of Eurocentric conception of human liberation. In fact, one of his most important texts, 'Eurocentrism: Modernity, Religion, and Democracy: A Critique of Eurocentrism and Culturalism' rejected not only the Eurocentric view of world history but sought to provide a new and refreshing understanding of phases of human transformations. Very early in his life, Samir Amin had been a member of the French Communist Party, but he soon understood that the chauvinism and narrowness of certain sections of the communist movement prevented them from grasping the real liberatory content of Marxism. Up to today, certain communist parties such as the South African Communist party (SACP) accept the stage theory of history, which allows them to support the enrichment of a black bourgeoisie. In their rendition of Marxism, the growth of a bourgeoisie was necessary for the development of a working class.

From his break with the French Communist Party and a Soviet Marxism that was preaching the so-called 'non-capitalist path', Samir Amin set out to critique the mechanistic and linear conceptions of development which attributed a common characteristic of five modes of production: communalism, slavery, feudalism, capitalism and socialism. Karl Marx had developed this schema of human transformations in his analysis of human society and Marxists after Marx sought to find in all human societies the same stages that Europe had passed through. Marx himself had offered the concept of the Asiatic mode of production to characterise the social formations that were dissimilar to Europe, but this idea was underdeveloped in the work of Karl Marx. Samir Amin wanted to understand the specificities of the European experience and introduced a novel concept, that of the tributary mode of production to be able to clarify why societies such as Egypt and China which had been developed thousands of years before Europe never transformed into the capitalist mode of production. His thesis, repeated throughout his work, was that, 'The tributary mode is the most general form of the pre-capitalist class society, that slavery is the exception not the rule, and that like the pure merchant mode, it is marginal; that feudalism is a peripheral form of the tributary mode and that, precisely because it was an immature form, still stamped by characteristics of its original communal society, it was fated to go beyond itself more easily, thereby ensuring Europe's particular identity.'

It is this identity of Europe that brought humanity the mode of capitalism that Samir Amin now sees as, a parenthesis in history. 'The principle of endless accumulation that defines capitalism is synonymous with exponential growth and the latter, like cancer, leads to death.' This is the statement on the first page of the book, 'Ending the Crisis of Capitalism or Ending Capitalism?'

How can humanity, especially the poorest 4 billion citizens of the planet, escape this fate of certain death, which emanates from the principle of endless accumulation? The insights on the tributary mode were drawn from a wider conception of the world and the state of knowledge that was available at the time of Karl Marx. Hence, Samir Amin declared in his own words that one had to understand the limits of the state of human knowledge at the time of the writing of Marx and Engels.

'I was an early reader of Marx. I very carefully read capital and other works by Marx and Engels that were available in French… But at the same

time, I remain unsatisfied. For I had posed one central question, that of the "underdevelopment" (a new term beginning to be widely used) of the societies of contemporary Asia and Africa, for which I had found no answers in Marx… Far from abandoning Marx, and judging that his work had remained unfinished. Marx never completed the work he had intended to do, including, among other things, interpreting the world dimension of capitalism in his analysis and systematically articulating the question of power (politics) and the economy (capitalist and pre-capitalist)' ('Global History: A View from the South', p. 1).

The Social Classes Caught at the Forefront of the Challenges for Humanity

It was in moments when Samir Amin reflected on his own work in the ranks of revolutionaries in Africa and Asia where we have a better understanding of his contribution at the theoretical level as well as the realm of popular political struggles. Those who have been battling Eurocentrism within the World Social Forum movement have witnessed Samir Amin at first hand, and this year his presence at the World Social Forum at the same time as the Egyptian uprising gave radicals and activists from across Africa an opportunity to understand the importance of the long contributions of Samir Amin. It was the same 10 years ago when Samir Amin placed himself firmly within the ranks of those fighting against racism in the World Conference against Racism in Durban (WCAR). It is not often that Samir Amin wrote or spoke of his own service, but one such recorded version of his contribution can be found in the First Babu Memorial Lecture that he delivered on 22 September 1997, in London.

Here Samir Amin traced his links to the struggles in different parts of Africa and his association with A.M. Babu and the Zanzibar revolution. In this lecture, he divided this political work of himself, Babu and their contemporaries into three phases, that of the period before the Bandung conference of 1955, the Bandung period and the highpoint of liberation and the third stage of the period of the recolonisation of Africa. Because of modesty, Amin did not elaborate on the fact that in collaboration with intellectuals such as Norman Girvan from the Caribbean and working through UN agencies such as UNCTAD, Third World radicals had seized the international initiative and leaders such as Michael Manley, Julius Nyerere and Fidel Castro were calling for a new international economic order (NIEO). Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan's mantra that there was no alternative to capitalism was a direct response to the radicalism that had enveloped the world in the post-Bandung period and had inspired national liberation movements.

Neo-liberalism was accompanied by what Amin called 'the military management of the international system', but progressives such as Babu and Samir Amin never wavered. Granted, he was making this delivery on Babu in 1997. In light of the new uprisings all over Africa and the Middle Wast we would now add a fourth stage, that of the present revolutionary upsurge in the era of financialisation and capitalist depression.

The breakthroughs of Amin's contribution can now be compared to other African revolutionaries who sought to be creative in order to understand the specificities of their societies. Imperial social sciences continue to work to erase the contributions of African intellectuals such as Walter Rodney, Archie Mafeje, Claude Ake and hundreds of other dedicated scholar–activists. Frantz Fanon, Amilcar Cabral, A.T. Nzula, Walter Rodney and A.M. Babu were just a few of the revolutionaries who made sterling contributions to an alternative understanding of the paths forward. Since most of these Marxists were men, radical African feminists have been enriching our understanding of the interconnections between class and gender struggles and the issues that arise from ideas about human sexuality. Pambazuka has continued to support a better understanding of ideas about human sexuality with the publication of the book, 'African Sexualities: A Reader'.

It is from Egypt where radical women such as Nawal El Saadawi have been promoting a brand of self-organisation and self-confidence in African women that became manifest in the work of women such as Asmaa Mahfouz and the other forces of the April 6th youth movement. Throughout Africa, there is a new cadre of radical women who link the struggles of anti-imperialism to the struggles of women and those of same-sex orientation. Like most of the traditional left in Africa, Samir Amin is virtually silent on these matters of gender but he joins forces with African feminism when he lambasts political Islam and unmasks the ultra-reactionary and masculinist assumptions of fundamentalism, whether Christian, Islamic or Hindu.

From his first and major study of 'Accumulation on a World Scale', Amin distilled the lessons of this imperialism and unequal exchange and for a long time in the 1970s there was a long debate on whether there was such a phenomenon such as unequal exchange. Now the debate has not only ended, but unequal exchange has given way to plunder and clear looting as there is a new scramble for African resources in the age of the biomasters. Within Africa, there is an urgent need for a theoretical understanding of the relationship between genetically modified crops, expropriation of poor peasants, the growth

of slums, droughts, climate change and the food crises. Such an understanding will enable younger radicals to link the so-called war on terror as a front for the recolonisation of Africa as the present NATO invasion of North Africa has so clearly exposed. Samir Amin was always drawing attention to the mechanisms of looting and alerted students to how the colonial period had laid the foundations for the contemporary looting.

The most consistent and damaging form of dispossession is now being carried out in the African countryside by biotech companies and agribusiness firms pushing the 'green revolution' in Africa. Loss of species diversity, perpetual debt and structurally exploitative and dependency-creating international plans are only the surface manifestations of the threats that genetically modified organisms pose to Africa. Below the surface lay the damage and contamination of Africa's genetic diversity, particularly endemic species, while in the long run lay the dangers outlined in the plans for 'the modernisation of agriculture.' This discourse on modernisation is not new. What must be understood are the continuities from the past and the new twists in the old story of the exploitation of Africans?

Samir Amin summed up the experiences of 'underdevelopment and dependence in black Africa'. It is here where he continued to analyse the impact of capitalism on the poor peasantry as he had studied in capitalism and ground rent: the domination of capitalism over agriculture in tropical Africa. Samir Amin made the original contribution in assessing the impact of the colonial trade economy, the Africa of the mining concessions and the Africa of the labour reserves. In his conclusion of this essay, which was taught in the heyday of the Dar es Salaam school, he stated plainly:

'In all three cases, then, the colonial system organized the society so that it produced in the best possible terms, from the viewpoint of the mother country, exports which provided a very low and stagnating return for labour. We have to conclude that there are no traditional societies in Africa, only dependent peripheral societies.' ('Underdevelopment and dependence in Black Africa: Origins and contemporary forms', in the Journal of Modern African Studies, vol. 10, no. 4 (December 1972), pp. 503–24)

For 50 years, Samir Amin has been articulating the dangers to the African peasantry and preparing us to understand the social dislocations that emanate from the destruction of the agrarian sector. Writing a preface to a book on 'African Agriculture: The Critical Choices', Samir Amin explicitly spelt out the reality that globally 'the development strategies implemented in Africa since independence have neither aimed at achieving the priority task of an agricultural revolution, nor really aimed at any significant industrialization, but basically extended the colonial pattern of integration in the world capitalist system.'

'The catastrophic results are now obvious; moreover the Western inspired policies of so-called "readjustment" to the new conditions created by the global crisis (through the IMF and World Bank recipes) would only worsen the case. Hence, another development, fundamentally based on a popular alliance, is the only acceptable alternative. The priority target of achieving the agricultural revolution clearly calls for industrialization, but a pattern of industrialization quite different from the conventional one… This national and popular content of development, in its turn, is virtually inconceivable without significant change toward democratization of the society, allowing for an autonomous expression of the various social forces and creating the basis for a real civil society. Simultaneously, the weakness of African states, referred to here, calls for co-operation and unity without which any national and popular attempt would remain extremely limited and vulnerable.'

Struggling for a New Mode of Politics and a New Mode of Social Organisation

In the analysis of Samir Amin, African peasants are not victims waiting for international non-governmental agencies to come to 'alleviate poverty', but active agents seeking to change their conditions. The challenge then, as it is now, was how to move these dependent societies on a path of local accumulation that would change the quality of the lives of the majority of the producers. It is here where we go back to the ideas of socialism or barbarism developed systematically in the book 'The Liberal Virus: Permanent War and the Americanization of the World'. In order to prevent a catastrophe, it will be necessary to 'preserve peasant agriculture for the entire visible future of the 21st century'. Herman Scheer, another visionary revolutionary, had come to the same conclusion in his book on the solar economy. In the concluding pages of this book on the future of renewable energy, Scheer had come to the same conclusion as Samir Amin, that one of the most urgent tasks of the 21st century was the need for our society to return to the land. Scheer was of the view that the development of a solar economy will see the location of energy sources and the accompanying storage industries in diverse and often peripheral locations. Scheer claimed that solar technologies will also bring an agricultural revolution which will have dramatic consequences for rural life. As one reviewer summed

up this thinking: 'His vision is not of a return to a medieval world of subsistence farming but rather the promotion of what he calls "real biotechnology" to develop the new applications to which biological materials can be put.'

The ideas of Scheer on the tapping of solar power brought the discussion on the future development of science and technology to the point where the development of the productive forces will make old assumptions about markets irrelevant with the tremendous possibilities open to humans in the era of converging technologies (biotechnology, nanotechnology, information technology and cognitive technologies). Imperialism is mining the cognitive skills of the Africans who resisted 'modernisation' because there is the understanding that these peoples could be the springboard for new collective ideas about the relations between humans and humans and between humans and nature. Samir Amin gingerly tiptoed into this new era when he went beyond the certainties of predictability to tentatively offer the view that chaos theory may open new possibilities. 'Chaos functions explain natural phenomena which cannot otherwise be accounted for. Could the discovery also be relevant for the social sciences?'('Global History: A View from the South', p. 108.

Here we have Samir Amin mulling over the fact that chaos theory and the laws of unforeseen circumstances could contribute to the analysis of a number of economic and social phenomena. The chaotic structures of the world financial markets and the environmental destruction emanating from the forms of capitalist plunder presents chaotic conditions from which only planned and clear human actions can intervene for a different world.

Will the Political Mobilisation of the Popular Forces Provide the Conditions for a Leap Beyond Capitalism?

Throughout his writings Samir Amin officered up the idea that so-called backwardness may be an advantage in Africa because this supposed 'backwardness' may allow Africans to leapfrog the destructive forms of industrialisation that has brought about the near destruction of the planet. There is no space in this commentary for the elaboration on the possibilities of a quantum leap in world politics. I have outlined these possibilities by drawing on an understanding of quantum possibilities in the recent book on 21st-century politics.

Samir Amin placed himself at the service of humanity and it should be stated that he remained within the thick and thin and hustle and bustle of African intellectual ferment. Hence although Samir Amin wrote about accumulation on a world scale and imperialism and unequal development, today younger activists can seek clarity from his writings in order to understand the real reasons for famine in an era when some societies are subsidising farmers to produce food which is dumped. It is from the realities of the interconnections between famine, the war on terror, the scramble for oil, plunder in the Congo and the gobbling up of land by big companies where Pambazuka is seeking to give clarity, and the connection to the work of Samir Amin is a logical path to continue the kind of work that Samir Amin and Babu undertook in another period.

Samir Amin at 80 years old is insistent that continuous political mobilisation of the popular classes for democratic openings will offer new possibilities. Samir Amin sees new opportunities from the reconstruction of a new solid front of the oppressed peoples of the world.

'The political regimes in place in many of the countries of the South are not democratic, which is the least that one can say, and sometimes they are frankly odious. These authoritarian structures of power favour the comprador factions whose interests are linked to the expansion of global imperialist capital. The alternative is that the construction of a front of the peoples of the South passes through democratization. This democratization will necessarily be difficult and long, but the way towards it does not lie in the installation of puppet governments, which hand over the resources of their countries to be pillaged by North American transnationals. These regimens are even more fragile, less credible, and less legitimate than those they replace under the protection of the American invader. After all, the objective of the United States in not the promotion of democracy in the world despite its purely hypocritical discourses in this matter.'

Samir Amin has lived a long life, and as Pambazuka celebrates his 80th birthday this month may his work inspire those who want to create a world of free humans, liberated from the ideas of chauvinist domination and a populist nationalism that manipulates the land question to serve the interests of a black capitalist class in Africa.

Note

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