



Africa's pioneering Marxist political economist, seen from South Africa – Samir Amin, 1931-2018

Samir Amin's celebrated life was amongst the most trying, but also rewarding, of his generation's left intelligentsia. His political and professional fearlessness were two traits now recognised as exceedingly rare. Alongside extraordinary contributions to applied political-economic theory beginning sixty years ago, Amin's unabashed Third Worldist advocacy was channelled through unparalleled scholarly entrepreneurship. En route during the 1970s he established surprisingly durable research institutions, including CODESRIA, and then from the mid-1990s set up the first of the alter-globalisation networks that today span various sectors of civil society struggling for local and global justice.

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After a privileged youth in Egypt as the child of two medics, Amin attended university in Paris where his PhD offered a scathing Marxist analysis of South-to-North 'unequal exchange.' Amin returned to his homeland, but after testing the limits of Nasser's Arab nationalism – as an anti-Stalinist communist – in 1960 he was forced into exile. Amin soon won credibility for his tireless economic planning in West Africa, especially Mali, under United Nations auspices. By 1970 he was chosen director of the UN's Dakar-based Institut Africain de Développement Économique et

de Planification (IDEP). He also found time to catalyse a powerful Dakar development NGO, Enda, as well as CODESRIA. Both are still going strong and in early 2018, Enda worked closely with Amin to begin the "Rapport Alternatif sur l'Afrique" (<https://rasa-africa.org>) against mainstream and neoliberal strategies.

By 1980, Amin's progressive strategies had alienated the tip-toeing head of the UN Economic Commission on Africa, Adebayo Adedeji, who pulled IDEP rightwards. Remaining in Dakar, Amin moved office a few blocks away to start the Third World Forum, an institute he led until his death. From 1996, the World Forum on Alternatives was one of its global offshoots, five years before the World Social Forum was launched.

I last visited Amin in early 2018, at his old-fashioned Dakar home-office in a dilapidated bank building, which decades ago was one of West Africa's greatest skyscrapers. He was busy with a stream of new essays and books, and although expressing far less confidence in statist counter-hegemonic prospects than in prior eras, he maintained faith that new waves of people's movements were emerging across Africa as neoliberal austerity returns. Unique among intellectuals, I'd seen his central role in advisory sessions over the prior two decades with the likes of Castro, Chavez and the world's most respected grassroots activists – and there is truly no one to take his place.

Amin's best-known books came at the height of dependency theory's popularity during the 1970s: *Unequal development; Accumulation on a world scale; and Imperialism and unequal development*. His book *Eurocentrism* hit a nerve in 1988, and in 1990, *Delinking* summed up why the still young era of globalisation would further underdevelop Africa, and why a more self-reliant strategy was necessary. Amin's memoir, *A Life Looking Forward*, was published in 2006 and contains delightful tales of youth, professional score-settling of a political-intellectual (not personalistic or sectarian) nature, and profound appreciations offered to Isabella, his wife of more than six decades. More recent books include *Ending the Crisis of Capitalism or Ending Capitalism?*, *Global History; Capitalism in the Age of Globalization*; and *The Law of Worldwide Value*. In these, Amin became as ruthless a critic of extreme Islam and other dogmatic religious movements, as of neoliberal imperialism.

The main merit of Marxist analysis, Amin argued in 2016, is its "claim simultaneously to understand the world, our capitalist global world at each stage of its deployment, and provides the tools which make it possible for the working classes and the oppressed peoples, i.e., the victims of that system, to change it." Amin endorsed an epistemology – a theory of knowledge production – not based upon participatory action research, but conflict-seeking research: "Marxism does not separate theory from practice; Marxist praxis associates both. Marxists try to understand the world through the processes of action to change it. You do not understand first through a process of academic research developed in isolation and then eventually try to modify reality by making use of the theory. No. Marxist praxis is a process which involves simultaneously theory and practice, mobilising all ordinary people, the working classes and the oppressed nations. While you progress in your struggles, you understand better the reality that you are fighting against."

The Marxist tradition is often criticised for failing to capture African nuances, especially in the relationship of the capitalist mode of production to other systems. Amin was occasionally critical of Rosa Luxemburg yet worked within her tradition, which from 1913 drew upon South Africa, Namibia, Zimbabwe, Zambia and the Democratic Republic of the Congo to understand these articulations. Capitalism, she argued, "is the first mode of economy which is unable to exist by itself, which needs other economic systems as a medium and soil... In its living history it is a contradiction in itself, and its movement of accumulation provides a solution to the conflict

and aggravates it at the same time." It would be fifty years before her focus on capitalist/non-capitalist relations were again pursued with Marxist rigour. In West Africa's Ivory Coast, French anthropologist Claude Meillassoux carried out studies on the Guro women's role in the 'domestic economy' and its articulation with wage labour during the 1960s. During the early 1970s, South African sociologist Harold Wolpe applied Meillassoux's ideas to help revive and regenerate his South African Communist Party's tradition of race-class debate, and in 1980 Anne-Marie Wolpe contributed a much more gendered analysis of social reproduction within articulations of modes of production.

But the richest contribution has come from Amin, especially his theory of unequal exchange based on surplus value transfers associated with lower productivity in relation to the North's higher productivity outputs sold to the South. His many subsequent books elaborated the geopolitical implications of imperial power, but it was in the last book published during his life – *Modern Imperialism, Monopoly Finance Capital, and Marx's Law of Value* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2018) – that he most forcefully restated his commitments to this tradition :

How is it that full-fledged industrial capitalism expanded victoriously throughout the 19th century, survived its first systemic crisis of senility during the 20th century, and faces apparently victoriously until this day its second long crisis of senility? The answer cannot be found in the abstract theory of capitalism, but on the ground of the concrete history of its deployment. These two sides of the analysis should not be confused and reduced to

one. After Marx himself (for his time) Rosa Luxemburg was the first Marxist thinker who made a serious attempt to answer the question...

The fundamental – fatal – contradiction of capitalism resulted into continuous overaccumulation and therefore, faced a problem of outlet for capitalist production. On that ground Luxemburg is certainly right. How this contradiction has been overcome in history? Here also Luxemburg is right: capitalism expanded by destroying pre-capitalist modes of production both within the societies of the dominant centers and the dominated peripheries. Handicrafts are replaced by manufacturing industries, small shops by supermarkets etc. This process of accumulation by dispossession still goes on with the current privatization of former public services. Simultaneously these responses of capital to the problem of outlet constitute an efficient counterforce to falling rates of profits.

For these thoughts on how the system reproduces, we will be forever grateful in South Africa, no matter that he regularly castigated our local revolutionaries for giving up the ghost. In one book, *From Capitalism to Civilisation* (2010), Amin traced South Africa's shameful historical role within world capitalism. On occasional visits here, Amin expressed dissatisfaction with the many concessions made to capital, regretted that Africa's most capable industrial base was destroyed by excessive liberalisation, and complained that Pretoria officials were too willing to re-legitimise Western economic power.

Langa Zita, the African National Congress' Gauteng Province director of Political Education and Training, wrote a masters thesis drawing mainly upon *Delinking*. Says Zita, "Amin reread the Liberation movements not only from the standpoint of their slogans but as an expression of the class tendencies that animated such movements. His ideas live. We will continue to draw our sustenance from those ideas as they empower in our effort to chart a path to socialism."

Excerpt from Amin's book *From Capitalism to Civilisation: Reconstructing the Socialist Perspective* (2010)

In South Africa, the first settler-colonisation – the one of the Boers – led to the creation of a "purely white" State involving expulsion or extermination of Africans. In contrast, the initial objective of the British conquest was to forcibly submit Africans to the requirements of the metropolis' imperialist expansion primarily for the exploitation of the minerals.

Neither the first colonisers (the Boers) nor the new ones (the British) were capable of standing as autonomous centres. The Apartheid State of the post-war period attempted to do so, basing its power on its internal colony – Black for the essential part – but did not reach its ends owing to an unfavourable numerical balance and to the growing resistance of the dominated populations who will finally be victorious. The powers

in place after the end of Apartheid have inherited that issue of internal colonisation without having, up to now, brought in its radical solution.

The case of South Africa is especially interesting from the point of view of the effects of colonialism on political culture. It is not only that here, internal colonisation was bluntly visible, even to blind people. It is also because communists in that country had been able to draw from the situation a lucid analysis of actually-existing capitalism.

South Africa is a microcosm of the global capitalist system. It gathers on its territory the three components of that system: a minority which benefits from the rent of situation of the imperialist centres, two majority components of more or less equal importance distributed into an industrialised "Third World" (the emerging nations of today) and a marginalised "Fourth World" (in the former Bantustans), similar to the non-industrialised regions of contemporary Africa. What is more, the proportions between those three components' populations are more or less the same as those which characterise the current global system.

That fact certainly contributed to giving South African communists the clairvoyance which was theirs. That political culture has died out today, not only in South Africa, with the (belated) adhesion of the CP to the commonplace thesis of "racism" (which gives the status of a cause to what is a mere effect); but also at global level, with the adhesion of the majority of communists to social democracy.