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Samir Amin

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Pioneer of the Rise of the South



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Preface

Samir Amin: Pioneer of the Rise of the South

Samir Amin is an outstanding intellectual with a truly global horizon combined with an enormous productivity.¹ His scientific work overcomes the over-specialization that characterizes many theoreticians and planners of development. Their narrow scientific approach, their fixation on models is alien to Amin. His capacity to pursue evidence-based research in the best sense of the word, from a historical and comparative perspective, is quite rare. His analyses always take into account socio-structural conditions and considerations of political power, and his orientations, ideologies and ways of thinking point the way ahead, and this has made him a source of never-ending inspiration through a historical-materialist approach that rejects orthodoxy and dogmatism. Amin's driving force has always been to notice new development trends and to review his own position, to initiate new debates, and to get involved in ongoing ones. The source of this intellectual and political impetus has been a continuing curiosity and an argumentative political disposition. And this curiosity and argumentative disposition extend from analytical contributions to global historical developments prior to the existence of capitalism up to reflections on topical development projects in the narrowest context. His work forms an empirically based and fundamental critique of capitalism, but also provides pioneering proposals for a desirable future. As Samir Amin once argued, he has never been a 'tiers-mondiste' (focusing only on Third World issues), but always a 'mondiste' with a global orientation. This—and not only this—distinguishes him from many of those who hold prominent positions in the Who's Who of social and development theory, and more recently of world analysis. His lifelong scientific achievements demonstrate a freedom of thinking that has always resisted constraint.

¹ This text is based on the *laudatio* by Prof. Dr. Dieter Senghaas (University of Bremen) on 4 December 2009 in Berlin, where Samir Amin was awarded the Ibn Rushd Prize for Free Thinking. This text was translated from German into English by Hans Günter Brauch and language-edited by Mike Headon, Colwyn Bay, Wales (UK). The *laudatio* of Prof. Dr. Dieter Senghaas in German is at: <<http://www.ibn-rushd.org/typo3/cms/en/awards/2009/laudatory-held-by-dieter-senghaas/>>. The acceptance speech by Prof. Dr. Samir Amin in Arabic is at: <<http://www.ibn-rushd.org/typo3/cms/en/awards/2009/speech-of-the-prize-winner/>>.

Samir Amin has been one of the most important and influential intellectuals of the Third World. In contrast with many development researchers who emerged in both industrialized and developing countries during the nearly six decades which his comprehensive work covers, he has always pursued a global perspective. *Accumulation at the global level*: this paradigm for diagnoses of the history, structure and development dynamic of the world as a whole rather than single continents, societies or regions became an analytical and political challenge to all current analytical and political thinking on development, especially of the Neo-classical and Soviet Marxist schools.

Samir Amin was born on 3 September 1931 in Cairo, the son of an Egyptian father and a French mother who were both medical doctors. His childhood and youth were spent in Port Said where he attended the Lycée Français and where he obtained his baccalauréat in 1947. From 1947 to 1957, he studied in Paris where his Ph.D. in economics (1957) was preceded by diplomas in political science (1952) and in statistics (1956). In his early autobiography *Itinéraire intellectuel* (1993), Amin wrote that during these times he preferred to invest only a minimum of his time in preparation for his university exams in order to be able to devote most of his time to militant action. His politicization, already evident during his period as a high school student, obviously continued in Paris—unsurprisingly, since Paris has always been a metropolis with an incomparable and highly vibrant intellectual life. The city was a scientific meeting place for intellectuals and students from all over the world, not just from the Francophone parts of Africa. Immediately after his arrival in Paris, Amin joined the *Communist Party of France* (PCF) and so he naturally became involved with the intellectual and political controversies within the left and its various factions that were to dominate the intellectual scene in the French metropolis for several decades. His later distancing from Soviet Marxism and its development paradigms was influenced by his experiences during these early years when Amin, together with other Third World students, was editing the journal *Étudiants Anticolonialistes*. This journal was not always popular with the Central Committee of the PCF. Several of Amin's comrades-in-arms later held leading positions in the administrations of newly independent Third World countries, especially in Africa.

In 1957, Amin submitted his Ph.D. dissertation and one of his advisers was François Perroux. He proposed as its title *Aux origines du sous-développement, l'accumulation capitaliste à l'échelle mondiale* [On the origins of under-development, capitalist accumulation at the global level]. But this title was too sensitive for the Paris of the mid-1950s. His advisers persuaded him to choose a rather more esoteric title instead: *Les effets structurels de l'intégration internationale des économies précapitalistes. Une étude théorique du mécanisme qui a engendré les économies dites sous-développées* [The structural effects of international integration of precapitalist economies. A theoretical study of the mechanisms that generated the so-called under-developed countries]. In his dissertation Amin correctly assumed that the thesis of under-development as a product of capitalism had not previously been formulated from this specific perspective. His key idea, as presented in 1957, was that the 'under-developed economy' should not be considered

as an independent (self-referential) unit but only as a building block of a capitalist world economy, and that the societies of the periphery required a permanent structural adjustment with respect to the reproduction dynamics of the centres of world capitalism, that is, of the advanced capitalist industrial countries.

One has to take the context of the 1950s into account. Amin's thesis was indeed new and original in the framework of the debates on development theory and politics that were in their initial phase of ascendancy: at that time in Latin America the so-called *desarrollismo* (CEPAL, Prebisch et al.) was emerging, that was developed further a decade later in the discussion on *dependencia*. Wallerstein's world system analysis came even later. But even the conventional development theories had not yet really come to prominence; their representatives (W. A. Lewis, A. Hirschman, G. Myrdal, W. W. Rostow, P. Rosenstein-Rodan et al.) had been presented by the World Bank in 1984 in the volume *Pioneers in Development*. Only from the late 1960s could it be observed that discussions on development policy received essential impulses from international organizations, such as UNCTAD, the World Bank, and later the ILO.

It is therefore astonishing that Amin produced as early as 1957 a precise and subtle critique of positions taken 10–20 years later by his intellectual opponents. His critique also extended to Soviet Marxism and its development program of 'catching up and overtaking' ('rattrapage'). These facts have often been overlooked because Amin's thesis of 1957 was not published until 1970 in extended book form under the title *L'accumulation à l'échelle mondiale* (Accumulation at the global level).

After obtaining his Ph.D. Amin returned to Cairo where from 1957 to 1960 he was *Chef du Service des Études de l'Organisme de Développement Économique* (Director of the research agency of the organization of economic development). He was to some extent entering the lion's den, because in the planning administration the further development of Egypt was planned in a way that went against Amin's insights. Not only because of this, but to escape personal dangers and difficulties, Amin left Cairo to become an adviser for the planning ministry in Bamako (Mali) from 1960 to 1963. This was a time when many African countries were becoming independent and a political radicalization ('African socialism') could be observed on that continent. In 1963 Amin was offered a post at the *Institut Africain de Développement Économique et de Planification* (IDEP). From 1963 to 1970 he worked at this Institute in Dakar, established by the United Nations, and at the same time taught at the University of Poitiers and later at the Universities of Dakar and Paris (Paris VIII–Vincennes). In 1970 Amin became director of IDEP, where he remained until 1980.

During this time several big conferences took place that supported networking among Third World intellectuals working on development issues: in 1972, there was the first conference for theoreticians of peripheral capitalism such as Amin and prominent theoreticians of *dependencia* (Cardoso, Quijano et al.). I was honoured to participate and intellectually benefitted from this 1972 conference as one of three scholars from industrialized countries to be admitted, though not without reservations. (This conference motivated me to edit a volume on *Peripherer Kapitalismus. Analysen über Abhängigkeit und Unterentwicklung* [Peripheral

capitalism. Analyses on dependency and underdevelopment], published in 1974). In retrospect with regard to his time at IDEP, Amin emphasized that the goal was to educate about a 1000 young African intellectuals who were to gain the capacity to assess development programmes and policies critically.

In 1980, Amin left IDEP and became the director of the *Forum du Tiers Monde*, also headquartered in Dakar. This forum is an NGO whose task is to link through globally oriented projects, conferences, and platforms intercontinental discussion on development issues from the perspective of Latin America, Africa, and Asia. In 1996, Amin accepted in addition the presidency of the *Forum Mondial des Alternatives* which perceives itself as a counterpart of the World Economic Forum in Davos and that presented in 1997 the manifesto *Il est temps de renverser le cours de l'histoire* [It is time to reverse the course of history].

Samir Amin has published about 50 books; most have been translated into many other languages. His most important early work is undoubtedly *L'accumulation à l'échelle mondiale* (1970). Another milestone is his book *Le développement inégal* (1973), which was translated into many languages. Between these two books there were several publications in which Amin in light of his theory dealt with specific country studies (on Egypt, Mali, Guinea, Ghana, the Maghreb countries, the Ivory Coast, Senegal, and West Africa in general and the Arab region). *Classe et Nation dans l'histoire et la crise contemporaine* (1979) is another important publication that opens up a perspective on global history and development history that transcends narrow discussions on development theory. Amin's analysis of the option of socialist development can be found in his *L'avenir du maoïsme* (1981). The essence of his thinking on decoupling is contained in his book *La déconnexion* (1985). After 1989 and 1990 Amin published several books on globalization and on its inherent crises (for example, *L'Empire du chaos*, 1991). He offered a critical assessment of contemporary debates, especially in response to a dogmatic postmodernism, in *Critique de l'air du temps* (1997). His book *L'hégémonie des États-Unis et l'effacement du projet européen* (2000) is a brilliant plea for a 'European Project' as a counter to undisputable US hegemony in order to submit no longer—as in the wars in the Gulf and Kosovo—to the 'Washington Diktat'. Later, Amin repeatedly regretted that this much-desired European project remained weak and in no position to develop its own globally relevant stance. In Amin's diagnosis, it has fallen through because of submission to the hegemony of Washington. His later works develop his criticism of capitalism and his critique of the global power structure (*Au-delà du capitalisme sénile*, 2002); they also intervene in the debate on postmodernist and culturalist movements and fashions (*Modernité, religion et démocratie*, 2008). In all his publications, Amin has been an astute analyst but at the same time always a political writer.

What then has been Amin's intellectual contribution to global and development analysis: the contribution of the scientist, of the contemporary analyst, and of the intellectual arguing acutely but always from an informed political perspective?

From a global historical perspective *development* is identical with capitalist development. But in differing from Marx and the bourgeois economists Amin

has always relied on the observation that *real capitalism* can only be analyzed from a global perspective. Hence his title that showed the way for others to follow: *L'accumulation à l'échelle mondiale*. However, Amin does not suppose that the plundering of the southern continents during the period of early colonialism and mercantilism caused a breakthrough toward agricultural and industrial capitalism among the successful early industrializing countries. Neither does he assume that industrial development in the so-called centers or metropolises of capitalism could have occurred without the peripheries in the southern continents (the colonies, the informal empire, etc.). During the early phase of agricultural and industrial capitalist development, successful only in Europe, this process was facilitated by the existence of peripheries but they were not its functional cause. The development dynamics of the centres resulted from an inherent accumulation dynamics whose structural and political background resulted in an *agricultural revolution* as a consequence of the process of defeudalization. This resulted in a synchronous or somewhat later broad *industrialization* that led first to the production of simple and nondurable products for a mass market; through this, simultaneously or a little later, a new capital sector evolved; the products of this capital sector significantly increased productivity in the agricultural and consumer sector and then also in the capital sector. For Amin, it is important to observe from a secular development perspective that in the European centers of capitalist development, as a result of successful political struggles, an increase in real wages followed the increase in the productivity of the whole economy; this facilitated the creation of a dynamic of the domestic market that stimulated increases in productivity in all sectors. Such a dynamic had been created much earlier in the USA and in the two European settler colonies of Australia and New Zealand by the relative shortage of labor.

Just as the dynamic of metropolitan accumulation cannot be explained purely through economics but only through analyzing socio-structural development and the constellations of political conflict (political struggles with historically and principally open consequences), so the dynamic of peripheral accumulation cannot be conceived purely in terms of economics. For Amin it emerged in such a way that the peripheries as external territories, as exclaves of capitalist centers, were forced to integrate into an *unequal* international division of labor, and as a result a structure of asymmetric interdependence evolved. In a different way from how the concepts of dualism underpin theories of modernization, this type of integration into the world market leads to a reinforcement of the image of 'periphery', since as a result of the accumulation dynamic that prevails in the peripheries the reservoir of cheap labor that will remain cheap never dries up, regardless of whether in practice the economy in the exclave is based on agriculture or mineral extraction, or whether the first stages of industrialization ('import substitution industrialization', industrialization through the replacement of imports to encourage local production) are to be seen.

Why does the reservoir of cheap labor not decline? Why does no synchronization of the development of productivity and of wages take place in the peripheries? Why does no widespread and extensive intensification of capital exist? The answer may be found in the model of peripheral accumulation dynamics that

Amin gradually developed as a result of case studies of many countries employing many comparative observations. These facts may be described relatively easily: the dynamic of peripheral accumulation is systematically distorted. It has as background the lack of a broadly based agricultural revolution. It gains its dynamics through an export economy that relies on exclaves. Its counterpart is an import sector of 'luxury goods' defined as a demand coming from the consumed part of the profits. What is lacking in this accumulation dynamic is 'auto-centered development': the inevitable feedback of a sector for mass consumer goods and a sector for capital equipment (i.e., of machines that have been locally produced) on the back of increasing agricultural productivity.

From this it is obvious that for Samir Amin the question of agriculture has been and still is of central strategic relevance for development. Many of his empirical studies have addressed this problem. As an inevitable consequence, for him the agricultural question has not only been a question of the distribution of land but may also be understood as the problem of how in this sector legal certainty (property rights) may emerge and to what degree an equivalent industrial sector may be willing to supply and be capable of supplying infrastructure goods and equipment that will permit a dynamization of the agricultural sector.

From Amin's analyses the prognosis may be that the transition from a dynamic of peripheral accumulation to economic development in terms of metropolitan capitalism remains improbable if not impossible ('développement bloqué'). Hence his pleas for 'déconnexion' or 'decoupling'. Decoupling is thus defined as the submission of the external relations of a country to the logic of genuine internal development. This is the opposite of the prevailing orientation of the peripheries, which is to satisfy the needs of metropolitan capitalism with the consequence of an inevitable *polarization* of existing capitalism at the global level: its moulding of *metropolitan* and *dependent peripheral* capitalism. Such a strategy of 'auto-centered' development through decoupling cannot be imagined without active intervention by the state. It is the task of the state, together with interested social parties, to find that mixed strategy whose goal it must be to selectively use the opportunities of the world market—as long as they are compatible with the state's own project—for the dynamization of a broadly based internal development.

For Amin it was clear that such a development option (decoupling, not autarky!) requires corresponding political preconditions. His case studies of countries, initially limited to North and sub-Saharan Africa, taught him that such an elite, that is, a national bourgeoisie oriented toward a national project, neither existed nor was in the process of emerging. Rather, he saw everywhere the creation of a *comprador bourgeoisie* (meaning more or less what André Gunder Frank later described as the "Lumpenbourgeoisie"). This *comprador bourgeoisie*—and this was demonstrated by the empirical material—could only foresee its future in the integration of their countries into an asymmetrically structured capitalist world market, since they would directly benefit from such an integration. Decoupling could only be an instrument of a differently oriented development—of a development beyond capitalism (including its state socialist variation). These considerations motivated Amin to analyze in detail the Chinese development strategy.

This development paradigm, which Amin constantly refined and corrected at a detailed level, contradicted from the outset any model of linear-evolutionist development. His approach challenged the ‘developmentalism’ of the bourgeois or neoclassical variant of development theory. Amin explicitly opposed the ‘desarrollismo concept’ that emerged from the CEPAL school. He considered it analytically as reasonably workable (although not fully convincing) but politically an illusion. With this paradigm, Amin also contested the development ideology of Soviet Marxism which had attracted much sympathy among the new elites of the Third World during the phase of decolonization and also during the post-colonial years of nation-building. The consequence was that Amin, during the 1970s and 1980s, was extremely sceptical and fundamentally critical of several prominent programmes of development policy and planning: for example the New International Economic Order (and its operative concepts), the strategy of basic needs, and the ILO program for the informal sector.

From his perspective the goal could not be ‘catching up and overtaking’ but only a different form of development: ‘faire autre chose!’: a different development strategy for those population groups that have been systematically discriminated against and marginalized necessitated their politicization and democratization. After the liberation of the peoples (‘libération des peuples’) as a consequence of the successful struggle for decolonization, Amin now focused on social revolutionary movements, on a revolution of the masses (‘révolution des masses’). Economic development has always been and still is for Amin a *political* economy and even more a process of cultural revolution, because ‘faire autre chose’ is not conceivable without a corresponding political consciousness.

In the timely context of his dissertation Samir Amin examined three social projects:

Fordism with the consequence (at least in Europe) of a social democratic welfare state, the ‘Soviet’ model as opposed to capitalist development, and ‘desarrollismo’ or ‘developmentalism’ as a project of development by catching up. As early as 1989–1990, but especially during the 1990s and later, Amin examined the failure of these three projects in a number of publications. The social democratic welfare state and its specific regulatory mechanisms were eroded; the possibilities for political steering by the state were undermined by the globalization of capitalism, and equivalent means of control which could only have been set up by international organizations did not exist at the regional or global level. The Soviet model collapsed because of its internal contradictions, and especially because the transition from an extensive to an intensive economy failed, and this was (among other reasons) another consequence of the absence of political reforms. And so all hopes for this alternative model, widespread for decades in the Third World but never shared by Amin, collapsed. Finally came the failure of ‘Bandung’, seen as a label for a ‘catching up’ system of development. This resulted in a differentiation within the Third World into a few centers which Amin considered as newly semi-industrialized countries and into a world of the marginality of the ‘fourth world’ (‘quart mondialisation’) which includes not only large areas of the Southern continents but also parts of the former socialist countries.

It is not surprising that due to these developments Samir Amin did diagnose what one of his book titles of 1990s signaled pointedly as *Le grand tumulte* (1991) and as *L'Empire du chaos* (1991). A world without reliable mechanisms of regulation at the national and international level, without an inspiring counter-model and without recognizable prospects for development success—a world in which an increasing polarization at the world level and within societies could no longer be tolerated and which was becoming increasingly politicized. In such a world the worst might be expected, without mentioning other world problems such as global environmental change.

For Samir Amin the global crisis of capitalism has continuously intensified during the past twenty-five years, despite intermittent phases of economic growth which, seen retrospectively, did not overcome the fundamental contradictions of the system: the trend towards polarization, towards inequality and towards marginalization, which have all rather increased. During this period the ‘liberal virus’ has spread, i.e., the tendency to deregulate everything (*Le virus libéral. La guerre permanente et l'américanisation du monde*, 2003). Amin foresaw the global financial crisis resulting from a combination of a growing inequality of income, deregulation of financial markets, irresponsible business behaviour and other factors, for example when he wrote, as early as 2001: “But the ‘financial bubble’ cannot grow without limits: one day it will burst. It is already a cause for concern. Therefore, some reformers suggest reducing the danger by removing the incentives for speculative short-term placements, e.g., by the splendid Tobin Tax.”

This very development of the financial market—its delimitation and its autodynamic (self-referential) expansion without any mechanisms of self-correction—is a prototypical example for what Amin has called the “fetishizing of the market”. This and other catastrophic developments especially during the past two decades are the result of a political herd instinct, particularly in the behaviour of the leading capitalist industrial societies. They all followed the orthodoxy that blossomed in the Anglo-Saxon world: TINA (“There is no alternative”), and this led Amin to diagnose the hegemony of the USA, but now linked to the development of a ‘collective imperialism’, especially among the societies of the so-called triad (USA or North America, EU Europe, and Japan). This club also tries to monopolize those fields of action that are relevant for the further development of the world: technology, financial flows, access to the raw materials of the world, communication and media, as well as weapons of mass destruction. Associated with this club of collective imperialism are the so-called semi-peripheries. The transition of the G-8 to the G-20, as has recently occurred at least in terms of declarations, could possibly be a step toward a *dependent cooptation*. The rest of the world would remain ‘the rest’. Wherever political interests made it necessary, these countries would become the object of military intervention. But given the chaotic situation in many countries of the world, the prospects for a successful and cost-efficient intervention remain poor.

Are there ways out of this catastrophic situation? Samir Amin has always been not only an incisive analyst but also a political activist with a clear perspective. Some examples may be briefly noted:

1. There is a need for a ‘new start towards development’, i.e., of a critical alternative development concept, not based on ‘development by catching up’ but

oriented towards a different noncapitalist development. According to Amin this would be a ‘socialist development’, but not in the sense of the single socialist development projects of Soviet Marxism. This new start should rely on social movements. And it is this assumption that motivates Samir Amin’s global and untiring activities in various nongovernmental organizations—because the elites cannot be expected to launch such a new start.

2. Furthermore, and logically consistently, Samir Amin argues that without decoupling (which is not identical with autarky) there will be no new start toward development. Decoupling means the subordination of external relations to the needs of the internal structure, and not the other way round, e.g., no unilateral adjustment to the tendencies prevailing at the global level.
3. Emphatically, Samir Amin pleads for a regionalization of the world (*Pour un monde multipolaire*, 2005). This represents a plea for a regionally oriented ‘collective self-reliance’ as a basis for the restructuring of global relations and the regulation of needs to be agreed on at the global level.

It may be asked: are these single program points, here shortly outlined and in toto, not the expression of pure utopia? Amin’s answer to this question is: yes, but these proposals that point the way ahead follow the logic of a ‘creative utopia’. “History is not ruled by the infallible unfolding of the law of pure economy. It is created by the societal reactions to these tendencies that express themselves in these laws and that determine the social conditions in whose framework these laws operate. The ‘anti-systemic’ forces impact and also influence real history as does the pure logic of the capitalist accumulation.”

Samir Amin has been exposed throughout his life to such contrary and highly politicized logics, and he himself has contributed convincingly to controversial debates about these logics at a global level.

May 2013

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