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Africa: Living on the Fringe

SAMIR AMIN

Let us consider first some facts which are hardly mentioned by the incense-bearers of globalization. In 1990, the ratio of extra-regional trade to GDP for Africa was 45.6 percent while it was only 12.8 percent for Europe; 13.2 percent for North America; 23.7 percent for Latin America; and 15.2 percent for Asia. These ratios were not significantly different throughout the twentieth century. The average for the world was 14.9 percent in 1928 and 16.1 percent in 1990.[1]

How can we explain this curiosity that Africa is apparently even more integrated in the world system than any other developed or developing region? Of course, the levels of development as measured by per capita GDP are highly unequally distributed, and from that point of view, Africa is the poorest region in the modern world system, its GDP per capita amounting to only 21 percent of the world average and 6 percent of that of the developed centers. Therefore, the high proportion of Africa's extra-regional trade with respect to its GDP would reflect the small size of the denominator of the ratio. At the same time, Africa's exports (as well as imports) represent only a minute proportion of the world's trade. And this is exactly the reason why Africa is considered marginal in the world system, i.e., having little importance (the attitude being that the world could live easily without Africa).

The concept according to which a country or region is qualified as marginalized if its quantitative weight in the global economy is small, assumes implicitly that the logic of the expansion of the global capitalist economy pursues the maximization of production (and therefore also of trade). This assumption is utterly wrong. In fact, it matters little that Africa's exports have represented only a minute part of world trade in the past and today.

Capitalism is not a system that sets out to maximize production and productivity, but one that chooses the volumes and conditions of production that maximize the profit rate of capital. The so-called mar-

Samir Amin is director of the African Office (in Dakar, Senegal) of the Third World Forum, an international nongovernmental association for research and debate. He is the author of numerous books and articles, including *Spectres of Capitalism* (Monthly Review Press, 1998).

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ginalized countries are, in fact, the super-exploited in a brutal manner —and therefore, impoverished countries, not countries located at the margin of the system.

The analysis therefore needs to be completed on other grounds. The relatively modest ratio for the developed areas—North America (the United States and Canada) and Western-Central Europe (the European Union, Switzerland, and Norway)—is associated not only with the highest levels of development but also with qualitative characteristics that ought to be spelled out: all developed countries have been built historically as auto-centered economies. I introduce here an essential concept, which is ignored by conventional economics. Auto-centered is synonymous with "basically inward looking," not with "autarchic" (closed). That means that the process of capitalist accumulation in those countries that have become the centers of the world system has always been and, I submit, continues to be and will continue to be so in the visible future—simultaneously inward looking and open, even in many cases aggressively open (imperialist). That means, therefore, that the global system has an asymmetric structure: the centers are inward-looking, auto-centered and simultaneously integrated in the global system in an active way (they shape the global structure); while the peripheries are not inward-looking (not auto-centered) and therefore integrated in the global system in a passive way (they "adjust" to the system, without playing any significant role in shaping it). That vision of the real world system is totally different from the one offered by conventional thought, which superficially describes the world as a pyramid constructed of unequally wealthy countries ranking from the lowest levels of GDP per capita to the highest ones.

My conclusion from this conceptualization is that all the regions of the world (including Africa) are equally integrated in the global system, but they are integrated into it in different ways. The concept of marginalization is a false one, which hides the real question, which is not to which degree the various regions are integrated but in which way they are integrated.

In addition, the figures referred to above indicate that the degree of integration in the world system has not dramatically changed throughout the whole twentieth century, as is being suggested by the dominant fashionable discourse on globalization. There have been ups and downs, but the trend that reflects the progress of the degree of integration has been continuous and rather slow, not even accelerating throughout the last decades.

That does not exclude the fact that globalization—which is an old story—has developed through successive phases that should be identified as qualitatively different, focusing on the specifics of each of them, in relation to the changes required by the evolution of the centers of the system, i.e., dominant global capital.

On the basis of the methodology suggested here, we can now look into the various phases of Africa's integration in the global system and identify the specific ways in which that integration operated for each of the successive phases analyzed.

Phases of Africa's Integration in the Global System

Africa was integrated into the global system from the very start of the building of that system, in the mercantilist phase of early capitalism (the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries). The major periphery of that time was the colonial Americas where an outward-looking export economy was established, dominated by European Atlantic merchant capitalist interests. In its turn, that export economy, focused on sugar and cotton, was based on slave labor. Therefore, through the slave trade, large parts of Africa south of the Sahara were integrated into the global system in a most destructive way. A good part of the later "backwardness" of the continent is due to that form of "integration" which led to a decrease in population to the extent that it is only now that Africa has recovered the proportion of the global population of the world it probably had around 1500 A.D. It has led also to the dismantling of earlier larger state organizations which were replaced by small brutal military systems and permanent war between them.

In America itself, the mercantilist form of integration in the world system destroyed the potential for further development in many devastated regions. During that phase of early capitalism, the highest rates of growth were achieved in areas such as the Caribbean, North-East of Brazil, and the southerly North American British colonies. An expert of the World Bank, if he had visited those areas at that time, would have written about their "miracle" (the value of Saint Domingue's exports of sugar was, at one time, larger than the total exports of England!) and concluded that New England, which was building an auto-centered economy, was on the wrong track. Today Saint Domingue is Haiti and New England has become part of the United States!

The second wave of integration of Africa in the global system was that of the colonial period, roughly from 1880 to 1960. Once conquered, it was necessary to "develop" the continent in question. At this juncture, both the reasonings of world capitalism—what natural resources do the various regions of the continent possess?—and those of the previous history of African societies come into play. It seems to me that in this context we should understand each of the three models of colonization operating in Africa: (1) the trading economy incorporating a small peasantry into the world tropical products market by subjecting it to the authority of a market of controlled oligopolies, making it possible to reduce the rewards for peasant labor to the minimum and to wasteland; (2) the economy of Southern Africa's reserves organized around mining, supplied with cheap labor by forced migration coming precisely from the inadequate "reserves" rooted in traditional rural subsistence; and (3) the economy of pillage which the concessionary companies embarked upon by taxing products from elsewhere—where the local social conditions did not permit the establishment of "trading," nor mineral resources justify the organization of reserves designed to supply abundant manpower. The Congo basin belonged to this third category in the main.

The results of this mode of insertion into world capitalism would prove catastrophic for Africans. First it delayed—by a century—any commencement of an agricultural revolution. A surplus could be extracted from the labor of the peasants and from the wealth offered by nature without the investments of modernization (no machines or fertilizer), without genuinely paying for the labor (reproducing itself in the framework of traditional self-sufficiency), and without even guaranteeing the maintenance of the natural conditions of reproduction of wealth (pillage of the agrarian soils and the forest). Simultaneously, this mode of development of natural resources tapped into the framework of the unequal international division of labor of the time, excluding the formation of any local middle class. On the contrary, each time that the latter started the process of its formation, the colonial authorities hastened to suppress it.

As a result, today most so-called less developed countries are located in Africa. The countries that today make up the "fourth world" are, for the large part, countries destroyed by the intensity of their integration in an earlier phase of the global expansion of capitalism. Bangladesh, the successor state of Bengal, which was the jewel of British colonization in India, is a good example. Others have been—

-or still are—peripheries of peripheries.

For example, Burkina Faso has supplied most of its active labor force to Cote d'Ivoire. If one had taken into consideration the two countries as, in fact, constituting a single region of the capitalist system of the epoch, the characteristic rates of the "Ivory Coast miracle" would have had to be divided by two. Emigration impoverishes the regions that feed its flow and thus support the costs of bringing up youth who are lost the moment they become potentially active, as well as the costs of supporting the old after their return. These costs, much greater than the "money orders" sent to the families by the active emigrants, are almost always forgotten in the calculations of our economists. There are only a few countries which are "poor" and not integrated or only weakly integrated into the global system. Perhaps, previously one could mention North Yemen or Afghanistan, but their integration is now underway, like that of others, producing nothing more than a "modernization of poverty"—the shantytowns taking on the landless peasants.

The weaknesses of the national liberation movements and of the inheritor states of colonization date back to this colonial fashioning. They are therefore not the products of pristine pre-colonial Africa, which disappeared in the storm, even though the ideology of global capitalism endeavors to derive its legitimacy from this convenient myth in accordance with its usual racist discourse. The criticisms of independent Africa, of its corrupt political middle classes, of the lack of economic direction, and of the tenacity of rural community structures forget that these features of contemporary Africa were forged between 1880 and 1960.

No wonder then that neocolonialism has perpetuated these features. The form that this failure took is quite fully defined by the limits of the famous Lome Agreements which have linked sub-Saharan Africa to the European Union. These agreements have indeed perpetuated the old division of labor—relegating independent Africa to the production of raw materials, at the very time when, during the Bandung period (from 1955 to 1975), the Third World was elsewhere embarking on the industrial revolution. They have made Africa lose about thirty years at a decisive moment of historic change. Undoubtedly, the African ruling classes were partly responsible for what would lead to the involution of the continent, particularly when they joined the neocolonial camp against the aspirations of their own people, whose weaknesses they exploited. The collusion between the

African ruling classes and the global strategies of imperialism is therefore the ultimate cause of the failure.

"Development" in Africa

Yet, having reconquered their political independence, the peoples of Africa embarked as of 1960 on development projects, the main objectives of which were more or less identical to those pursued in Asia and Latin America despite the differences of ideological discourses which accompanied them here and there. This common denominator is easily understood, if we recall that in 1945 practically all Asian (excluding Japan), African (including South Africa) and—although with a few nuances—Latin American countries were still bereft of every industry worth this name (except mining here and there), largely rural by the composition of their population, governed by archaic regimes, whether land-owning oligarchies or colonial authorities.

Beyond their great diversity, all the national liberation movements had the same objectives of political independence, modernization of the state, and industrialization of the economy.

There is today a great temptation to read this history as that of a stage of the expansion of world capitalism, which was said to have performed certain functions attached to primitive national accumulation, thereby creating the conditions for the next stage, which we are now supposed to be entering, marked by opening up to the world market and competition in this field.

I will not suggest that we should yield to this temptation. The dominant forces in world capitalism have not "spontaneously" created the model(s) of development. This "development" was imposed on them. It was the product of the national liberation movement of the contemporary Third World. The reading which I propose therefore stresses the contradiction between the spontaneous and immediate trends of the capitalist system, which are always guided only by the short-term financial gain that characterizes this mode of social management, and the longer-term visions which guide the rising political forces, in conflict for that very reason with the former. This conflict is certainly not always radical, as capitalism adjusts itself to it, even profitably. But it only adjusts to it, it does not generate its movement.

All liberation movements in Africa shared this modernist vision, which for that very reason I qualify as capitalist. Capitalism by its concept of modernization was expected to produce the relationships of production and the social relationships basic and peculiar to that system: the wage relationship, business management, urbanization, patterns of education, the concept of national citizenship. No doubt other values, characteristic of advanced capitalism, like that of political democracy, were woefully lacking, and this was justified by the exigencies of prior initial development.

All countries of the region—radicals and moderates—elected by the same formula the single party, farcical elections, and leader/founder of the nation. Yet, in the absence of a middle class of businessmen, the state—including its technocrats—was expected to substitute itself. But sometimes also, the emergence of the middle-class was held in suspicion on account of the priority that the latter would give to its immediate interests over the longer-term ones under construction. Suspicion became, in the radical wing of the national liberation movement, synonymous with exclusion. This radical wing then believed naturally that its project was that of the "building of socialism." It then took up the Soviet ideology.

If we adopt the criterion of the national liberation movements, that is, "national construction," the results are, on the whole, debatable. The reason is that whereas the development of capitalism in earlier times supported national integration, globalization operating in the peripheries of the system, on the contrary, breaks up societies. However, the ideology of national liberation ignored this contradiction, having been enclosed in the bourgeois concept of "making up for historic backwardness," and conceiving this catching up by passive participation in the international division of labor (and not trying to modify it by delinking).

Depending on the specific character of pre-capitalist pre-colonial societies, the disintegration that took place was more or less dramatic. In Africa, whose artificial colonial demarcation did not respect the previous history of its peoples, the disintegration wrought by capitalist peripherization made it possible for ethnicism to survive, despite the efforts of the ruling class following national liberation to get rid of its manifestations. When crisis came, suddenly destroying the increase in the surplus which had enhanced the financing of the trans-ethnic policies of the new state, the ruling class itself broke up into fragments which, having lost every legitimacy based on the achievements of "development," tried to create new bases for themselves often associated with ethnic retreat.

While a number of countries in Asia and Latin America did embark during those "decades of development" of the second half of the twentieth century on a process of industrialization which turned out in some cases to be competitive on global markets, "successful development" (in fact growth without development) remained in Africa within the old division of labor, i.e., providing raw materials. The oil-producing countries are a good example of this, since other major mineral resources, such as copper, suffer a long structural demand crisis, but this can also be seen in some "tropical agricultural" societies, such as Cote d'lvoire, Kenya, and Malawi. These were shown to be "brilliant successes."

In fact, they had no future, as they belonged to the past from the very start of their prosperity. Therefore most of those experiences turned out to be unsuccessful even within the limits of the old division of labor. This is the case in most of sub-Saharan Africa. These difficulties were not necessarily the product of "bad policies," but of objective conditions. For instance, this type of development had already been achieved in colonial times and reached its ceiling by 1960. This is the case of Ghana: the Cote d'lvoire miracle was just a matter of "catching up" with colonial West African coast achievements.

The End of a Century

What followed the erosion of the national development projects of the 1960s and 1970s is well documented. The starting point was the brutal reversal in the balance of social forces, to the benefit of capital, which occurred in the 1980s. Dominant capital, as represented by the transnational corporations (TNCs), moved into the offensive, operating in Africa through so-called structural adjustment programs enforced throughout the continent since the mid-1980s. I say so-called because those programs are more conjunctural than structural, their real and exclusive target being the subordination of the economies of Africa to the constraint of servicing the high external debt, which in its turn, is to a large extent the very product of the stagnation which started appearing in the less developed countries along with the deepening crisis of the global system.

During the two last decades of the century, average rates of growth of GDP have fallen roughly to half of what they had been in the previous two decades, for all regions of the world, Africa included, except Eastern Asia. It is during that period of structural crisis that the external debt of Third World countries (and Eastern Europe) started growing dangerously. The global crisis is indeed characterized by the growing inequality in the distribution of income, high rates of profits, and therefore a growing surplus of capital which cannot find an outlet in the expansion of the productive systems.

Financial alternative outlets have to be created to avoid a devaluation of capital. The U.S. deficit and external debt of Third World countries are responses to the system. The burden has now reached unsustainable levels. How could a poor African country earmark half or more of its exports simply to pay the interest on its debt, and simultaneously be requested to be "more efficient" and "adjust"? Let us remember that, after World War I, the payment of Germany's reparations represented only 7 percent of the exports of that industrialized powerful country. And yet most economists at that time considered the level too high and the "adjustment" of Germany to it impossible. It is interesting that Germany could not adjust to a loss of 7 percent of its export potential, but Tanzania is supposed to be able to adjust to a loss of 60 percent of it!

The devastating results of these policies are known: economic regression, social disaster, growing instability, and sometimes even total disruption of whole societies (as in Rwanda, Somalia, Liberia, and Sierra Leone). During the 1990s, the growth rate of Africa's GDP per capita has been negative (-0.2 percent), Africa being alone in that case. As a result, Africa's share of global trade decreased. That fact is precisely what is being qualified as "marginalization." Instead one should speak of a dramatic mal-integration in the global system. Conventional neoliberal economists pretend this is only a "hard transition" towards a better future.

But how could it be? The destruction of the social fabric, growing poverty, and the regression of education and health cannot prepare a better future or help African producers to become "more competitive" as expected. Quite the opposite.

This neocolonial plan for Africa is indeed the worst pattern of integration in the global system. It cannot but produce a further decline in the capacity of African societies to meet the challenges of the modern time. These challenges are to a certain extent new, relating to the long-term possible effects of the ongoing technological revolution (informatics) and through them, the organization of labor, its productivity, and new patterns of the international division of labor. What ought to be said in this respect is that all of these challenges are operating in the real world through conflicts in strategies.

For the time being the dominant segment of global capital—the

TNCs—appears to dictate what is favorable to the progress of its particular strategies. African peoples and governments have not yet developed counter strategies of their own similar perhaps to that which East Asian countries are trying to push ahead. In that frame globalization does not offer Africa solutions to any of its problems. Foreign direct private investments in Africa are negligible and exclusively concentrated on mineral and other natural resources.

In other words, the strategy of TNCs does not help Africa move beyond a pattern of international division of labor belonging to the remote past. The alternative, from an African point of view, needs to combine the building of auto-centered economies and societies and participation in the global system. This general law is valid for Africa today as it has been throughout modern history for all the regions of the world.

It is still too early to know if Africa is moving towards that goal. There is talk of an "African Renaissance." No doubt the victory in South Africa, i.e., the breakdown of the apartheid system, has created positive hopes not only in that country but throughout large parts of the continent. But there are not yet visible signals of these hopes crystallizing into alternative strategies.

That would need dramatic changes at various national levels, going far beyond what is generally suggested under the labels of "good governance" and "political multiparty democracy," as well as at regional and global levels. Another pattern of globalization would therefore gradually emerge from those changes making possible the correction of the malintegration of Africa into the global system.

Note

1. *S. Cordelier, La mondialisation au delà des mythes* (Paris: La Découverte, 1997), 141. Figures from WTO 1995.

The specific task of bourgeois society is the establishment of a world market, or at least in outline, and of production based upon this world market.

—Marx to Engels, October 8, 1858