REPLY TO WEEKS AND DORE

by
*Samir Amin**

The foregoing critique by John Weeks and Elizabeth Dore I consider to be based on a completely erroneous interpretation of my analyses. Though I have only limited space to reply, I nonetheless feel I can summarize my position[1] as follows:

The law of value is not limited to explaining the character of the social product in the capitalist mode of production, that is, its commodity character. Nor does it simply disclose the origin of profit, that is, surplus value. The law of value makes it possible to understand the laws of accumulation which determine the reproduction and expansion of the capitalist mode of production. These laws, expressed through balances and imbalances between the two sectors of production (production of the means of production and production of the means of consumption), give objective status to the value of labor power.[2] Indeed, the laws of accumulation establish the objective relationship between the value of labor power and the level of development of the productive forces.

The theory of imperialism must be based on the theory of value operating on a world scale. In these circumstances, the law of value must reflect the differing price levels at which labor power is sold in the various parts of the imperialist system. If, therefore, a relationship is to be established between the value of labor power and the development of the productive forces, it must be clearly understood which productive forces one is referring to: sectorial, national, or world-wide.

Within a given national territory, the level of development of the productive forces varies from one branch to another, but labor power has the same value. The orthodox argument linking wages to sectorial productivity is necessarily a marginalist argument, and one that is tautological, since it is not possible to compare the productivity of different branches. The unity of the commodity, capital and labor markets, on the one hand, and the determination of accumulation balances within this market on the other, force one to

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[1]English-speaking readers will find a full exposition of my arguments in my (1976, 1977, and 1978) works.

[2]In the original French version, the author uses "valeur de la force de travail," which was translated as "value of the labor force." We feel the correct translation should be "value of labor power" and have substituted this usage throughout (the editors).

conclude that the value of labor power is objectively linked to the national ("average") level of development of the productive forces.

But in this case, what is the significance of the universalization of the productive process on a world scale, on the same scale as imperialism? If the commodity and capital markets have become world markets, on the one hand, and if the space within which accumulation balances are achieved has become the whole world on the other, the value of labor power at the world level is thus linked to the world "average" level of development of the productive forces.

National differences in the price of labor power are therefore not to be explained by differences in average national levels of development, but rather by the fragmentation of the working class. Once again, the state-politics-class struggle factor is necessarily reintroduced into the theory of imperialism.

Moreover, in dealing with the imperialist system one is dealing with a system of social formations and not with the capitalist mode of production extended to the world as a whole. In this system of social formations, all the noncapitalist modes are dominated by capital, and hence surplus labor is wrested from the nonproletarianized producers to be turned into profit on capital. Thus the relations of exploitation of the original precapitalist classes are dominated, through these international class alliances, by the capitalist relations which determine accumulation on a world scale.

The price of labor power in the imperialist centers is therefore not independent of the price of this labor power in the dominated periphery, because the "average price" of the totality of labor power must correspond to their value, which is in relation to the development of productive forces on a world scale. The price of labor power at the center is indissolubly bound up with the imperialist character of the system of capitalist exploitation. This conclusion reflects political and idelolgical phenomena which are sufficiently obvious not to by systematically ignored.

What occurs with regard to the price of commodities ("unequal exchange") is not the outcome of phenomena related to circulation, but rather reflects back onto circulation the conditions of the creation and distribution of surplus labor within the imperialist system.

I fail to see anything in these arguments which can be considered as (1) "neoclassical"!; (2) "neo-Ricardian"! (see my critique of Sraffa in Amin [1978]); (3) based on an argument of "under-consumption" (see my critique of this argument in Amin [1974]); (4) "circulationist" (which would ignore classes etc . . . !!); (5) "eclectic" (is it forbidden to introduce new arguments in analyzing new realities — such as the universalization of the productive process — and does one have to limit oneself to Marx's exegesis to be a Marxist?).

There does exist a difference in political scope separating my analyses form that of Weeks and Dore, but it is not situated in the area where my critics locate it. In conclusion, I maintain that because Weeks and Dore are powerless to grasp the imperialist dimension of contemporary capitalism, my critics reflect the powerlessness of the working class and socialist movement in the developed centers. Compensated by a dognatic exposition, this impotence takes the form of an inability to grasp the nature of class conflicts on a world scale. This perspective reduces the confrontation between capitalism and socialism to a direct class conflict between capital and labor at the center of the system. Flying in the face of real history, it thereby renders impossible any understanding of either the scope of the national liberation movement in the Orient or of the East-West conflict, or of their prolongations within Western society.

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