

Samir Amin

Interviewed by Amady Aly Dieng

Samir Amin was born in Egypt in 1931 and received his higher training in Paris. He is one of the most influential neo-Marxist development theorists of the past three decades. He has produced seminal work on the relationship between imperialism, capitalism and globalization and has been a tireless advocate for an alternative socialist development. Among his more than twenty major works are *Beyond US Hegemony? Assessing the Prospects for a Multi-polar World* (2006), *The Liberal Virus* (2004), *Spectres of Capitalism* (1998), *Imperialism and Unequal Development* (1977), and *Unequal Development* (1976). He is currently based in Dakar, Senegal and is President of the Third World Forum.

AAD: Could you elaborate on your personal, intellectual and ideological trajectory and how it led you to adopt an intellectual position that capitalism represents a world system?

SA: I am a political animal and I can't separate my personal trajectory from my intellectual thought and my political actions and options. I explained in my memoirs, *A Life Looking Forward* (2007) how my attitudes and personal trajectories, intellectual thinking and political behaviour have all been combined. I have to say that early on, during adolescence, I took a triple inseparable position which has constituted my point of departure. This position is based firstly on a rejection of social injustice which I could see all around me in Egyptian society; the miseries of the working classes contrasted with the opulence and the waste of the wealthy classes. I have always rejected this. That was the point of departure of my social revolt. Secondly, my adolescence coincided with World War II and most probably my family influenced my position. I had adopted an anti-fascist position, I was an anti-Nazi and rejected the arguments of some other Egyptians that the enemy of my enemy was my friend, and therefore that the Nazis — as enemies of our imperial enemy the British — were friends. I considered Great Britain the friend in World War II. I was resolutely anti-Nazi and anti-fascist which led me early on to develop sympathies for the

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Soviet Union which was leading the war against the Nazis. The third dimension was my rebellion against the British imperialist domination.

These three positions, which have always remained with me, were my starting point. It wasn't until my student years in Paris immediately after the war that I became an active militant in anti-colonial movements. But I also developed early on a vision of the world which, though located within a Marxist framework to which I still subscribe, was a break with the dominant Marxist vision of the time. In my PhD which was written between 1954 and 1956 and defended in 1957, I elaborate on this vision. The title itself 'L'Accumulation à l'Échelle Mondiale' ('Accumulation on the World Scale') summarized a position which was very new at that time — that capitalism had to be considered as a world system and that development and under-development are two sides of the same coin. In other words, underdevelopment is not a form of delayed development. I would say without false modesty that I was an anti-Rostovian even before Walt Rostow wrote his book, *The Stages of Economic Growth* (1960). And I would also say that Andre Gunder Frank and Immanuel Wallerstein joined my standpoint on capitalism as a world system which I have maintained.

AAD: How do you view the relationship between capitalism and imperialism?

SA: My central idea, and I want to insist on this, is that capitalism is not only a world system, but it is a world system that is imperialist by nature. At each step of its development, since the conquest of America in the sixteenth century, it has been a system that has produced and deepened polarization, what I have called the 'centre-periphery'. This has been my central line, the central axis of everything I have produced on the evolution of the world system, the challenges of development, and the appreciation of experiments, whether socialist or others, against these challenges.

Therefore, imperialism is not a recent phenomenon. It has been tied to the development of monopoly capitalism at the end of the nineteenth century, as Lenin analysed. But it is a much older phenomenon than that. Of course the world expansions of capitalism and imperialism have passed through successive phases, each with their own particularity. Thus the shape of 'centre-periphery' polarization and the shapes through which imperialism expresses itself have changed, have evolved. But the polarization has never been reduced, it has always been deepened. And so the system has always been a capitalist imperialist system. I insist on this point, and I am not alone in maintaining it. The dependency school of Latin America, which I'm very close to, takes a similar approach. But this school did not form until the 1970s, roughly the same time as the world economy concept developed by Immanuel Wallerstein. I found myself close to these two

schools of thought because I already had, and still have, a similar idea. In my writings dating from the 1960s, I always attempted to analyse the challenges confronting development politics within this framework.

AAD: What do you mean when you use the term 'development' and what kind of change do you envision can be brought about by a process of development, or alternative development?

SA: Development cannot be a catching-up strategy within the capitalist logic because capitalist logic forbids it. The logic of imperialist expansion renders catching up an impossibility. Thus one needs to see, and I have always tried to see things in this way, development as an invention of another kind, different from capitalism. Starting from there the idea of de-linking imposed itself. De-linking is not autarky but rather a way of thinking about development other than from a framework of capitalism, of catching up. I must say that I am joined today by numerous currents of thought, especially those within an ecological framework which state that catching up is impossible and unacceptable because it will bring about the destruction of the planet. I am also joined by all the ideological currents which point out how the logic of the market — rabid consumerism and excessive waste — lead to the destruction and impoverishment of the human being.

For me development is not a process of catching up in capitalism, but a process of inventing a new civilization. The problem of development, then, is not only how to solve the underdevelopment of countries from the periphery, it is also the problem of how developed countries can transform themselves, change the system. I don't believe that there is another term to designate this other possible future than socialism. I am not amongst those who, after the collapse of socialism, said we were at the end of History and that we were in a capitalist system that was destined to survive for eternity. I am also not amongst those who think that, after all, this is not such a bad system, as it guarantees, at least, or even produces democracy and even perhaps social progress along with inequality. I am not amongst those who have abandoned their 'illusions'. I am amongst those who think that a critique of the past has to be seen as a contribution to the transformation of the future and not at all as a capitulation.

AAD: The term neo-imperialism has come into common usage, implying there's something new about Empire. Has something changed about imperialism, can it be conceptually distinguished from globalization and neo-liberalism?

SA: On the 'what's new?' question I have said that the newness is always located in something that seems to me to be ancient. I have said earlier that the expansion of capitalism and imperialism passed through successive phases. We have certainly entered a new phase. And each

of these successive phases brings its novelties and therefore its specificities which demand a new conceptualization. I am not amongst those who think that nothing changes, that it is always the same tune as usual. Even though some things don't change, even though Imperialism is constant, there are obviously variations in its modes of expression.

In my mind I would summarize what is new in two points. First, we have gone from a pluralist capitalist world system to a new stage in the deployment of imperialism. In the past we had imperialist powers in constant violent conflict with each other. We have moved from this system to another, characterized by the convergence of the interests and strategies of imperialist powers. Meaning we are witnessing a kind of collective imperialism which one could call the triad of central, developed capitalist powers: the United States with Canada, Western and Central Europe, and Japan. Collective imperialism in my vocabulary could mean super-imperialism as Karl Kautsky had already imagined it in 1912. Never mind the word and the fact that some had imagined it earlier or not: it is something new which was built gradually after World War II and which is now in startling evidence. This collective imperialism has its own collective instrument for managing the planet, including its economic instruments (World Bank, IMF, WHO), and its instruments for political and military management (the G7, NATO). This does not mean that there are no internal contradictions within this collective imperialism. There are contradictions of all kinds. But in my mind these are contradictions which develop on a political and cultural front (in the sense of political culture), rather than at the level of divergence of economic interests of dominant capitalism. This is something new.

The second novelty is that the South has split. It's true that the South has never been homogeneous and the peripheries have always been diverse and have been shaped in different ways to fulfil diverse functions in the service of capitalist accumulation in its world expansion. Not only are the peripheries, the three quarters of humanity, made of people with histories far more ancient than capitalism, but they fulfil different functions in the capitalist system at its different stages of global development. However, one can say that up to a point, in the phase preceding World War II, the 'classic' phase which covers most of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century, the contrast between 'centre' and 'periphery' was almost synonymous with 'industrialized regions and countries' versus 'non-industrialized regions and countries' which remained agrarian and mining-oriented in the frame of the global system. The common denominator was that these countries had not entered the era of industrialization. This changed after World War II. The struggles for national liberation and the victories of national freedom movements, whether radical (as in

China or Vietnam) or moderate (with the simple objective of gaining independence as it was in other countries in Asia and Africa), put development on the agenda.

One remembers the 1960s and 1970s, the decades of development, and the pressure these countries put on the United Nation system to ensure that development be taken into account. Incidentally, development at that time was considered as a process of catching up within the system (for most countries), or catching up outside the system as was the case for the socialist countries. These victories — and not defeats as people say today (or other such absurdities) — these struggles for independence and socialist revolutions are at the origin of the preoccupation with development. These victories in the name of socialism, in the name of national independence, did constrain imperialism, which had to adjust to the needs of these countries as they engaged in the industrialization process. At that time it was imperialism that was constrained, that adjusted to the demands and needs which were in conflict with the logic of the expansion of world capitalism. Whilst today, structural adjustment is exactly the opposite: it is the adjustment of the weak to the demands commanded by the strongest. These victories have produced what they have produced. They have produced a growing differentiation within the Third World. Some countries have engaged with industrialization, going further, whilst others have gone less far.

AAD: Can you provide examples of the different ways the industrialization process occurred in the post-war period and comment on the challenges these pose in theorizing about ‘emerging’ economies?

SA: Let’s take the case of China. The Chinese miracle began in 1950 with the de-linking and the Maoist construction of a national conscience through a radical reform of agriculture and primary industries. These steps set the foundations for the subsequent miracle of the acceleration of industrial development. The decades preceding 1980 were not a period of stagnation, a period of waiting to discover the solution of the market. On the other side, other countries (and we who are in Africa know this well) moved towards industrialization only timidly.

This type of rupture is a characteristic of the current system. In the periphery are two groups. On the one hand, there is a group of societies carrying projects. This is the case not only of big countries like India, China and Brazil, but also of others of medium size, like Malaysia or some countries in Latin America. And on the other hand, we have societies not carrying their own projects (the rest of the Third World now coined ‘marginalized’). I shall come back to that term which in my mind is questionable despite hiding some reality. This is a new challenge. The dominant literature presents the first group as the group of ‘emerging countries’ and readily interprets their progress

as real development and real catching up. There is a literature on the Chinese miracle, on China becoming the major economic, military and imperialist power of the twenty-first century.

I believe that one can discuss the nature of these projects from different perspectives. First is the perspective of internal social conflict: are these projects aimed at installing a national capitalism in the wake of an accentuation of class divisions and a crystallization of antagonist classes? Or does one need to see more nuances, and see projects which combine forms of capitalist development with elements of social development in conflict with capitalist logic? This needs to be discussed and is not the topic of this interview: one cannot put China, India, Brazil and South Africa in the same bag and say these are emergent countries. They are very different from one another and so are their positions. One therefore needs, and this is what I am trying to do now, to analyse and critique the projects of these third world countries, but from another perspective than the one currently dominating the literature — from a perspective that combines the social content of the project and a judgement on their capacity to catch up.

My opinion is that these countries are largely embarked on a road with a dead end. They will not be able to reach their goal of catching up. Imperialism has reorganized itself to face that challenge. The militarization of imperialism and the choice of the leader of the imperialist camp have the objective of making this catching up impossible. The strategy of the United States, the military control of the planet, is not only a strategy directed at the Iraqi people, but it is also directed at China: this is my perspective. Another reason which makes the catching up unrealistic is that as these countries go down this route, internal social contradictions grow and internal situations become more and more explosive. This can be seen in the case of China and other emerging countries. And with these conditions I do not believe that the prospect of any of these projects is as glorious as one would like to think.

AAD: What are the fundamental problems posed by the notion of empire in relation to development theory and practice?

SA: To answer this question we need to consider other third world countries, those which do not have a project and are therefore constrained and agree to adjust themselves unilaterally to the 'Empire', meaning imperialist globalization. These categories of countries have no project of their own but others have projects for them. We can talk about the American project for the Greater Middle East, because there is no Arab project; we can talk about the EU project for sub-Saharan Africa through the so-called partnerships agreements, because there is no African project or counter project. These situations are therefore very different from those of countries which have a project and

are in conflict (albeit limited conflict) with the logic of imperialist expansion. This leads me directly to the questions concerning development in theory and in practice.

I am amongst those who think that it is not possible to separate theory from the practice of development. I do not consider myself a theoretician of development, but a practitioner of development who has always thought that there is no practice without theory, that we need to deepen theory to serve a practice which clearly dictates the reasons for choices and objectives. It is in this perspective that I come back to the question of de-linking. If what I have said so far is correct, meaning that the catching-up project in the capitalist logic is impossible, then we have to consider another option.

And this other option demands a de-connection in the political and ideological sense, to have other objectives to build another world, to de-connect in the practice of the management of the economic society. As long as this system remains imperialist this could lead to a reduction of external relations with the dominant system. But this is not the essence of the de-linking; the essence of de-linking is to give itself a different perception than the catching up one. The term de-linking has not been well received because it may be understood as implying autarky, but it is not that at all. We can find de-linking ideas in the anti-globalization movements nowadays.

AAD: What new solidarities and collective action initiatives are emerging as a response to empire? In what ways do they represent an alternative to the dominant forms of capitalist logic?

SA: The anti-globalization movements say that we need to build a better world. That we need to de-connect with the capitalist logic in the world as it is. We need to break away from that logic and not only resist the negative elements of the system as it currently operates; we need to propose an alternative vision that is positive and different. This is anti-globalization. Of course there can be a conceptual diversity for the content of the objectives and also in the formulation of the strategies to achieve it. The current imperialist capitalism is obsolete. The evidence is that it needs military control of the planet to maintain itself. It faces 'storm zones' as the Chinese used to say. For this 'minority' of 75 per cent of humanity — all the Asians, the Africans and the Latin-Americans — the system in place is intolerable. And so, the rebellion (or the potential for rebellion) is permanent. But a rebellion does not necessarily mean an alternative positive push. Rebelling is resisting and refusing. To move from rebellion to the positive alternative is a difficult exercise. And this is what I call entering the long transition from imperialist capitalism to globalized socialism. This will not be a short transition opened up by revolutions which claim to be able to

resolve all problems in the short historic time of a few years. It will be necessary to move through 'revolutionary progressions', allowing us to go further in the crystallization of the socialist alternative on the world scale. This alternative is for the people in the North as much as it is for the people in the South who are the principal (but not the only) victims of the expansion of world capitalism. For me, de-linking is a synonym for a strategy of development conceived in the perspective of the long socialist world transition.

This leads me naturally to the question of the alternative. This alternative was given a name two or three years ago. It is the socialism of the twenty-first century. I think this name is not bad. What is positive is that it is a rupture from the nostalgia of the past. It is not about going back on the experiences of the past, not at all. These experiments have been what they have been — neither hell nor paradise, as some portray them today — and they have allowed enormous achievement. They have transformed the world in a way. The dominant ideology says that these experiments have been failures and, therefore, we must accept capitalism as the eternal system. I believe this vision is completely false. On the contrary, the violence following the expansion of capitalism invites us to think more about the necessity of a new wave of socialism.

We must dare to compare the birth of socialism with that of capitalism. The first wave of capitalist projects happened in Italian cities at the beginning of the thirteenth century. This first wave was aborted. The second wave came a few centuries later to England, the northwest of France and the Netherlands. This is the one that resulted in capitalism really taking hold. This second wave would not have happened without the first. We can say as much about socialism. The first wave, aborted, will be followed by another one. In history, a great success is often preceded by attempts which did not succeed, but which nevertheless point at the nature of challenges. We must see the construction of socialism in the same light.

AAD: What precisely is new about a twenty-first century perspective of socialism?

SA: I would say there is something fundamentally new in the twenty-first century perspective of socialism. There will not be any socialist progress without full democracy. I am not thinking about the 'petty democracy' reduced to multi-party elections. Without a democratization of society in all its dimensions — starting from labour and the management of enterprises up to political management, passing through the management of family relationships, gender relations, and through all aspects of life and secularization (the separation between religion and politics) — there will be no progress. There will be no social progress in the direction of socialism in the twenty-first century

without democracy. At the same time, no democratization is possible without social progress. Current ideology pretends that the system is not so bad because at least it brings democracy. I won't give the easy answer of how 'fake' that democracy is most of the time. What democracy in Iraq? Or in a Palestine occupied by Israelis? What democracy in the majority of countries where we have elections (as so often in Africa), but joke elections which produce no change? Democratization implies social progress. There is no democracy without one associated with (and not dissociated from) social change.

Dominant ideology presents democracy as a management process of politics dissociated from the social which is managed through the economy and the market. We need to associate what has been dissociated. The evidence that this is necessary is that people of Asia and Africa don't want the proposed democracy dissociated from social progress. That is why they engage themselves in the impasse and illusions of ethnic dictatorships and the pseudo-ethnic, religious and pseudo-religious. Because they consider the democracy which is offered to them (and they can see it through their experience) as a mockery that brings them nothing. This is what is new: the need to associate revolutionary progress and democracy, associate democracy and social progress.

This is my opinion which not everyone shares. For example there is a whole current represented within the anti-globalization world which thinks that it is not necessary to try to direct, to construct a positive alternative. They think it would be too dangerous. They think it is better to let life follow its course, as things will resolve themselves. This is the message of Negri's recent writings.

AAD: Is the theory developed by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri in their book *Empire* (2000) valid? And if so in which circumstances can we talk about imperialism potentially carrying advantages like democratization and social and economic development?

SA: Negri has theorized this school of thought which finds its roots in the Italian autonomism according to which people, through their own behaviour, transform the world. I believe this is very optimistic. This had been theorized for a while by the neo-Zapatistas in Mexico, more specifically by the sub-commandant Marco who said: 'we will transform the world without taking the power'. Unfortunately I think that we also need to think in terms of power.

The most positive changes that are taking place in the world today are happening in Latin America, whether in Brazil, Argentina, Venezuela, Ecuador, Bolivia or other countries. These changes have challenged governments as they currently exist. This idea that the world can change by itself without a coherent political strategy sounds illusory. Negri is the spokesperson of this idea. Without false polemic I

would say that Negri went from an extreme left-wing workers'-control position, which I critiqued at the time, to a right-wing position which I am still critiquing. It is not by chance that in this conceptualization Negri is forced to drop the term imperialism and to say that there is only one empire left, a big world system which transforms itself with a centre impossible to locate. Daily events since the wars decided upon and undertaken by the United States demonstrate that this vision is naïve. But it has some popularity amongst the western middle classes. Middle classes, in some ways, are victims of the system in that they are aware of the cultural impoverishment embodied by the market. Though they would like to defend their cultural values, at the same time they are also not in a situation as tragic as those doomed to die of hunger or of AIDS, for example. In these conditions the idea that the world can transform without too much effort is attractive. Unfortunately it is not realistic.

Those who ask me the question, 'Isn't it imperialism which brings democracy and social progress, so is it, after all, so bad?', they make me laugh. This type of democracy, as I have said, is not to be taken seriously. Take the case of Iraq as an example. If African and Asian people find refuge behind political Islam, political Hinduism, ethno-centrism which invites so-called 'peoples' to fight against each other, it is precisely because the model of democracy that the system offers them is perceived by them as a joke. Even though their answer isn't the right one, their assessment that this form of democracy is a joke is not wrong. And as for the social progress brought by the imperialist expansion, well this also makes me laugh. We are in a period of aggravation of social inequalities all over the world, from wealthy to poor countries. It is not pure chance that the fashionable slogan of the day is the 'fight against poverty', because this poverty is simply the product of the logic of expansion of the system.

AAD: What is the role of intellectuals in bringing about change?

SA: The intellectual is not the technocrat serving the system, but the one who critiques the system. There are no intellectuals at the World Bank. And so the intellectual, or the intelligentsia, is not able to be a civil servant in such institutions. The responsibility of intellectuals is to remain critical of the system. This is why I prefer to talk about intelligentsia because it is not a question of academic titles nor of the technical capacity of a bureaucrat or a technocrat, it is a question of intellectual capacity to take positions which are by nature inseparable from politics. It is a position that is critical by nature. This means that intellectuals have a big responsibility. I do not believe that intellectuals transform the world. But I don't believe that the world can transform without some decisive help from the intelligentsia. For example we cannot imagine the French revolution, which was the great revolution

of bourgeois history, without the Enlightenment. We could not have imagined the Russian revolution and the Chinese Revolution without the Third International, without the working class and the Marxist movement. In my mind we can also not think about the future without an intelligentsia which fulfils its role, which takes its responsibility.

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