

The Future of Global Polarization

Author(s): Samir Amin

Source: *Africa Today*, Vol. 40, No. 4, Challenges to Democracy (4th Qtr., 1993), pp. 75-86

Published by: Indiana University Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4186944>

Accessed: 29/05/2009 19:41

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/action/showPublisher?publisherCode=iupress>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit organization founded in 1995 to build trusted digital archives for scholarship. We work with the scholarly community to preserve their work and the materials they rely upon, and to build a common research platform that promotes the discovery and use of these resources. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



Indiana University Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Africa Today*.

*The Future of Global Polarization**

Samir Amin**

Introduction: a Historical Look at Capitalism

Inequality in the development of human societies has been part of known history since antiquity, yet it is only in the modern era that polarization has become the immanent product of global expansion of a system that for the first time in history has included all people of the planet, that system being capitalism.

This modern polarization (capitalist) has taken on successive characteristics which correspond to the evolution of capitalist production. First, the mercantilist era (1500-1800), just before the industrial revolution, was led by the hegemony of dominant Atlantic centers of capital, and created peripheries (the Americas) as a function of their complete submission to the logic of capital accumulation.

Second, the category that one could label as "classic" was organized after the industrial revolution, which defined thereafter the central forms of capitalism, while the peripheries (progressively all of Asia—except Japan—and Africa, as well as Latin America) remained rural and nonindustrialized. Because of this, their participation in the global capitalist division of labor could only be in the areas of agricultural and mineral production. This dominant trait of polarization was accompanied by a second, but no less important, characteristic of the system: the crystallization of industrial systems at the center as a controlled national system—constructed parallel to a national bourgeois state. The following two characteristics illustrate the dominant dimensions of national liberation ideology which emerged as a response to the challenge of polarization: (i) aspirations for industrialization—a synonym for progress and a way to "catch up," (ii) aspirations for the construction of a nation-state like the central models. The ideology of modernization

*This essay represents a condensed argument of the following works by Samir Amin: *The Empire of Chaos* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1992); *Itinéraire intellectuel* (Paris: Harmattan, 1993); *L'ethnicité à l'assaut des nations* (Paris, Harmattan, 1993); *Mondialisation et accumulation* (Paris: Harmattan, 1993); "Le système monétaire international est caduc, par quoi le remplacer?", published in English: "Replacing the International Monetary System?" *Monthly Review*, vol. 45, no. 5 (October, 1993); "Renouvellement ou érosion de la loi de la valeur?" forthcoming; and "La gauche occidentale vue du tiers monde," forthcoming.

**Samir Amin is presently director of the Third World Forum, a research institute located in Dakar, Senegal. He has written numerous works on the subject of international political economy. His most recent book is *The Empire of Chaos*. This essay was written originally in French. The translation was done by Lori Hartmann and Mathurin Houngnikpo.

is defined in these essential aspects of the term **modernity**. These forms of polarization defined the world system from the industrial revolution (after 1800) to the post-WWII period.

Third, the post-war period (1945-1990) saw the progressive erosion of the two characteristics explained above. The national liberation movements seeking to establish political autonomy grew in the peripheral states, and facilitated industrialization in those areas. Although industrialization was unequal, it was a dominant factor in Asia and Latin America. This period is simultaneously marked by the progressive dismantling of a national, autocentered system of production, and by the states becoming part of an integrated world system of production. This double erosion is the most recent manifestation of increasing globalization.

Fourth, these transformations emerge as a result of the collapse of equilibriums characterizing the post-WWII world system. The result is not a new world order marked by new forms of polarization and other phenomena, but rather a "world disorder." The chaos which defines the present situation is a result of the triple failure of a system which has not:

- i) developed new forms of political and social organization transgressing the nation-state—a new requirement of the globalization of the production system.
- ii) defined adequate systems of economic and political relationships reconciling the vigorous industrialization in the new peripheries—Asia and Latin America which have become competitive on the world market—with the pursuit of growth world-wide.
- iii) defined relationships with Africa—which is not engaged in competitive industrialization—other than those of exclusion.

This chaos is manifested throughout the world, displayed in all dimensions of political, social and ideological expressions of each region's crisis. It is at the root of the difficulties experienced in a Europe which suddenly seems incapable of pursuing market integration and the parallel development of political forms. It is also at the root of the changes which affect all the peripheries—Eastern Europe, the semi-industrialized former Third World, and the marginalized new Fourth World. Far from supporting the progression of globalization, this present chaos renders it extremely vulnerable.

Fifth, this present chaos should not keep us from thinking about

different possible evolutions which could steer us toward a "new world order," even if these evolutions take many forms, and if different types of future "world orders" are possible. The objective of this essay is to call for a discussion of these questions, including the unavoidable globalization discourse which boasts its triumph even when all the facts illustrate its precarious nature.

The reader will have no doubt noticed that the method proposed by this analysis of the history of world capitalism is not centered on the question of "hegemonies." I do not follow the method which proposes the reading of this history as one of successive hegemonies. The concept of hegemony—always defined in a vague manner in my opinion, not scientific and often sterile—should not constitute the center of the debate. On the contrary, I have developed the idea that hegemony, far from constituting the rule, was the exception in real history which was marked in a dominant way by conflict between partners resulting in the failure of hegemony itself. The hegemony of the United States, which seems to impose itself presently—maybe because of a lack of alternatives amid the chaos—remains fragile and precarious like the globalization process.

Today's World System

The debate must, in my opinion, open with a profound discussion of what is new in the world system that resulted from the erosion of the former system. As stated earlier on this issue, I believe there are two elements:

- i) the erosion of the autocentered nation-state and the resulting disappearance of coordination between the domain of the reproduction of accumulation, and that of political and social management. Until now, this coordination had been precisely defined by the borders of each autocentered nation-state.
- ii) the erosion of the following contrasts: centers = industrialized regions, peripheries = non-industrialized regions; and the emergence of new dimensions of polarization.

The position of a country in the world hierarchy is defined by its competitive capacity on the world market. Recognizing this fact in no way implies that one subscribes to the point of view that this position is attained through a "rational" political economy! We do not believe in

this vulgar bourgeois economics, for its rationality is precisely measured by adhering to the so-called "objective laws of the market." Contrary to these falacies (claimed to be true), I suggest that the "competitiveness" in question is the complex product of a set of conditions which operate in the realm of reality—economic, political and social. Furthermore, in this unequal battle, the centers put in place what I call their "five monopolies," which articulate the efficacy of their actions. These five monopolies encompass social theory in its totality:

i) monopolies from which the contemporary centers benefit in the area of **technology**: such monopolies demand huge expenditures that only the state—the large and rich state—can envision supporting. Without this support, which the liberal discourse implicitly excludes, and specifically the support of military expenditures, most of these monopolies could not be maintained.

ii) monopolies operating in the realm of control of world **financial flows**: the increasing permeation of major financial institutions which operate on the world financial market has given these monopolies an efficacy without precedent. Until only recently, the major part of a nation's savings could only circulate in the space commanded by financial institutions at the national level. Today, it is no longer the case: these savings are centralized through the intervention of financial institutions, for which the field of operation is the entire world. They make up financial capital which is the most globalized segment of capital. It remains the case that this privilege rests on a political logic which renders financial globalization easily acceptable. This logic could be challenged by a simple political decision of delinking which would limit globalization to the domain of financial transfers. However, the free movement of globalized financial capital operates in domains defined by a world monetary system which I deem obsolete. This system is based on the dogma of the market controlling the fluctuation of currencies and on the dollar being the universal currency. The former has no scientific foundation and the latter only functions as an alternative. A national currency can only play the role of an international currency in a satisfactory manner if the condition of international competitiveness generates an export surplus, thereby insuring the financing of structural adjustment of other countries. This was the case in nineteenth century Britain. It is not the case in the United States today because the U.S. finances its deficit by the loans which it imposes on other countries. This is also not the case for its rivals; Japan's surplus (Germany's having

disappeared after reunification) is not large enough to meet the needs of other countries' structural adjustment. Under these conditions, far from being a "natural solution," financial globalization is artificial and fragile. In the short term, it brings about permanent instability, not the stability necessary for an efficient adjustment process.

iii) monopolies operating with **access to the planet's natural resources**: the thoughtless exploitation of these resources now presents dangers to the planet, and capitalism, with its short-term social rationality, cannot overcome these problems. At the same time, these problems reinforce the control of developed countries over these resources as they do not want this wasteful behavior to be repeated elsewhere.

iv) monopolies operating in the domain of **communication and media**: these not only promote a uniform world culture, but also provide new means of political manipulation. The expansion of modern media's market is already one of the major components of the erosion of both the concept and practice of democracy in the West itself.

v) finally, monopolies operating in the field of **weapons of mass destruction**: formerly restrained by the bipolarity of the post-WWII era, this monopoly is now the weapon used only by US diplomacy just as in 1945. If "proliferation" brings about obvious dangers it is because there is no democratic control over the use of these arms.

Collectively, these five monopolies explain the framework by which globalization is expressed. Far from being an expression of "pure" economic rationality that one could separate from social and political frameworks, the law of value is the condensed expression of all of these conditions. I posit here that these predispositions prevent peripheries from achieving the goals of development through industrialization and devalue productive work, while they overvalue the so-called value-added attached to activities performed by these monopolies for the benefit of the center. They then create a new hierarchy of global income distribution—more unequal than ever—which reduces the periphery's industries to the role of sub-contractor. Because of these relationships global polarization will continue to shape the future.

An Alternative Humanist Project

Counter-balancing the dominant ideological discourse, I contend that "market globalization" is simply a reactionary utopia against which we must develop an alternative theoretical and practical humanist project based on a socialist perspective.

The realization of such a project implies constructing a global political system which is not "at the service" of the world market but which defines its domain of operation, similar to the way in which the nation-state historically has represented not the area of activity of the national market but the social framework for that activity. A global political system would have important responsibilities in each of the following four areas:

- i) the organization of **global disarmament** at the appropriate levels, which would free humanity from the threat of nuclear holocaust and other atrocities.
- ii) the organization of **equitable access—or increasingly less unequal—to the planet's resources**, and the creation of global systems of decision-making in this area including putting tariffs on resources which would force the reduction of waste, and the redistribution of the value and rent from these resources. By so doing, this would even create elements of a world fiscal system.
- iii) **open and flexible, yet controlled, negotiations concerning economic relationships between unequally developed regions of the world** with the goal of progressively reducing the technological and financial monopolies of the center. This implies, of course, the liquidation of institutions presently charged with managing the world market (the IMF, GATT, the so-called World Bank, etc.), and the creation of other systems to manage the world economy.
- iv) the organization of negotiations allowing for a **legitimate management of national/global dialectical conflict in the areas of communication, culture and politics**. Such an administration implies creating political institutions which permit the representation of social interests at the global level. In many ways, the creation of such a "world parliament" would go beyond the present concept of inter-state institutions.

Obstacles to the Realization of this Project

It is quite obvious that the above-mentioned proposals do not correspond with tendencies in the world today. Nor do the objectives of this humanist project coincide with the stakes of present conflicts. I am not at all surprised, and would even be more surprised if the case were otherwise. The erosion of the old world system did not prepare the way for its successor, which in the immediate time-frame can only emerge as chaos. The dominant forces set out their plan of action in this chaos, looking only for short-run benefits. By so doing, these powers aggravate the chaotic situation. Their attempt to legitimate their choices through the insipid ideology of the "self-regulating" market, by the affirmation that "there are no alternatives," or by pure and simple cynicism is not a solution to the problem; rather, it is part of the problem. Peoples immediate responses to the degradation of their conditions are not any more positive; in the confusion they could only be illusory. For example, responses such as the rise of fundamentalist or chauvinistic behavior could mobilize a considerable number of people. Acting in accordance with its historical vocation, the Left must attempt to construct, in theory and in practice, conditions for a humanist response to the challenge. Until the Left puts this humanist response into practice, regressive and criminal reactions remain the probable world agenda.

The difficulties which European integration faces provide a good example of the impasse constructed by the "globalization of the market." Amid the enthusiasm that the project originally evoked, these difficulties were not imagined despite the fact that they could have easily been foreseen. These problems had been anticipated for a long time by people like me who never believed that the common market alone would shape a unified Europe. We were saying that a project as ambitious as that one could only be carried out by a European Left capable of incorporating the construction of a unified market within a progressive social and cultural project without which the very edifice would remain fragile, even reversible with the slightest incident. The European Leftists must impose a double series of measures in each step of market integration: first, by assuring that the benefits of the project go back to the workers reinforcing their social power and their unity; and second, by initiating the construction of a political system which transgresses that of nation-states. This would be the necessary political format for the efficient management of an enlarged European market. Nothing like this has occurred. The European project has been led by the Right, reduced to its

mercantile dimension while the Left has been rallying all along for their proposed model without imposing their conditions. The result is obvious: changes in the world economy have forced European partners into adversarial positions where they only alleviate their own problems (specifically unemployment) to the detriment of others, and again without employing the most efficient means to accomplish this. Without the means to control market logic, they will be more and more tempted by reactionary solutions. Important politicians from both Germany and France, from the Left and the Right, have sincerely proclaimed their will to avoid these solutions, but only through political rhetoric.

The current European Community's difficulties emerge at the same time as a larger Europe adds new dimensions to the challenge. The European project provided the Left with the opportunity to re-think and to initiate a grand economic and political ("confederal") Europe by reconstructing the unity of labor at a European level. The Left has let the occasion slip away, and instead has allowed the Right to profit from the dissolution of the Soviet system by substituting a savage capitalist system. It is clear that this project to "Latino-Americanize" Eastern Europe can only weaken the opportunities for a Leftist redesigning of the European project, and the project will only accentuate the disequilibrium in the heart of "Europe of Twelve" to the benefit of the only partner capable of capitalizing on this evolution: unified Germany.

One of the major challenges confronting the new globalization is this crisis within the European project. But Europe is certainly not the only place one finds reactionary manifestations—tragic and inadequate responses to the challenge of constructing a renewed world system. All over the former Third World, especially in regions marginalized by the dissolution of the former world system (within the Islamic, Arab and African worlds), and also in the new Third World of the East (the ex-USSR and ex-Yugoslavia), the self-destructive responses are far from meeting the extent of the challenge.

Possible Future Scenarios

Taking into account the present maze of forces in conflict, the analyst who claims to be realistic, imagines several possible scenarios. I will examine a few in order to show that all these scenarios are short of satisfying the demands of a stable and acceptable world order, and that consequently they do not allow us to escape from the chaos.

The European question is central to the future of globalization. With the European project at a standstill, threatened by disintegration, those who are committed to the European idea may believe that accepting the

"second best" solution—that of a German Europe—is useful and plausible. Based on the German expansion in a latino-americanized Eastern Europe (following a tradition from Bismark to Hitler), this project will only tolerate association with France, Italy, and Spain if they do not hinder Germany's actions. With this hypothesis, it is quite possible to think that the British "vessel" will sail in American waters, distancing itself from "Continental" Europe. We are well on our way to this eventuality illustrated by the priority given in this model to a "neutral monetary management" (a technocratic concept based on political ignorance of money management), which has naturally been entrusted to the Bundesbank. I do not believe that this caricature of the original European project could really be stable, because in the long-run neither Russia nor France would accept the inevitable erosion of their positions. No matter which scenario emerges, whether it be Germany as the lone rider or a German Europe, neither will jeopardize the privileged functions of the United States. Because it is clear that neither of these options will be able to threaten the American position in any of the five monopolies which I described above, German Europe is forced to remain in the wake of the United States.

From there we move on to the actors in the second scenario, that of the return of "American hegemony" since there is no alternative. This scenario embodies many variants, the most probable including a certain degree of "sharing the burden" in accordance with a neo-imperialistic regionalization, harnessing Latin America to the American chariot, Africa to the Germano-European chariot (within which mere morsels are left for France). Yet, Europe will not wield power in the petroleum-rich Gulf region nor in the "Middle East Common Market" which remain within the domain of the U.S., whose presence is direct by way of military occupation in the Gulf and indirect through their Israeli alliance. Similarly Japan dominates Southeast Asia. Yet, this division does not imply equality between the three regions—the U.S. remains in its privileged position. Here again, I do not believe that neo-imperialist options of this nature guarantee the system's stability. They will be challenged here and there by revolts in Latin America, Asia, and Africa.

We must therefore fix our attention on Asia which is outside the Euro-American conflict. It is often remarked that even in the present global crisis, Asia is somewhat of an exception. In Japan as in China and Korea, and to a lesser degree in some Southeast Asian countries (Singapore, Thailand, and Malaysia) and even in India, their successes have been indisputable—in terms of growth and efficiency—measured

by competitiveness on the world market. Yet, it would be too easy to conclude that Asia will be the next hegemonic power. One must acknowledge that Asia, although divided into distinct nations, is more than half of the world population. Asia as the main region of capitalist accumulation could easily replace hegemony since the latter concept is somewhat vague. Again, we must explain how this accumulation will function, how different nations of the region will interact among themselves and with the rest of the world. Herein lies the rationale of the variants. The scenario most often imagined, that of Japanese imperialism dominating the region, is in my opinion, the least plausible. Japan's vulnerability remains a handicap which is too often underestimated by admirers of their recent economic success, and to overcome that vulnerability Japan remains in the wake of the United States. The claim that China or even Korea will be subordinated to Japan has no strong basis. Under these conditions the intervention of other outside powers would be required in order to manage the inter-Asiatic equilibrium. As the U.S. alone can fulfill this role, it would propagate its domination in the world system.

In any case the position of Asian countries will become strengthened, especially that of China. How will the U.S. react to this evolution? In my opinion, all the strategies of the world alliances depend on this question because it is clear that China's development will indeed challenge all global equilibriums. This is why their development will be seen as a threat to the U.S. I believe that the major conflicts of the future will be between Americans and Chinese. What will the European position be in this conflict? Presently, it is difficult to say.

Conclusion

The different possible scenarios into which present events may evolve do not challenge North-South polarization. The logic of the capitalist system perpetuates the center/periphery polarization by constantly renewing its modes of operation. The five monopolies on which I based my earlier reasoning will provide a foundation for this activity.

The reader will notice that there is nothing brand new in this perspective, that is, polarization is considered almost as a natural phenomenon. I will not conclude here precisely because all the changes of the past five centuries center on this topic: people marginalized by world capitalist expansion who seemed to have accepted their fate for too long, have decided to no longer accept it during the last 50 years or so, and will accept it less and less in the future. The positive aspect of the globalization which capitalism has initiated (and in the current

truncated version will not be able to surpass) is the worm in the fruit. The important aspects of the Russian and Chinese revolutions—going beyond the system and involving people of the periphery—will be pursued in new forms. Herein lies the ultimate reason for the instability present in the construction of "world systems." Surely, the conflicts of the future will be characterized by unequal relations, just as in the past. My intuition says that conflicts between the people of Asia and the dominant system will be determinant factors in the unfolding of history. This does not exclude others from this general revolt against polarization, just as this does not exclude advancements and transformations emanating from the center of the system itself. I have expressed my views elsewhere on the problematic of a world socialist transformation and will not return to that topic here. Even with these possible evolutions, one cannot ignore the potential for dramatic failures if people turn inward and refuse a universalist perspective. I have also talked about this elsewhere.

The project of a humanitarian response to the challenge of globalization initiated by capitalist expansion could appear "idealistic" to the reader, but it is not "utopic." On the contrary, it is the only possible realistic option in the sense that initiating this project will encourage all the powerful social forces capable of imposing their logic to come together. As far as I am concerned, moving in this direction should renew the perspective of world socialism. To prepare the conditions, one must first reorganize the ideological and political forces capable of combatting the five monopolies by which capitalist polarization reproduces itself, and then impose a "mutual adjustment" in place of the unilateral adjustment encouraged by capitalist logic. On the ideological and cultural front, this combat requires re-thinking the debates which I deem fundamental: i) the universal/particular dialectic; ii) the relationship between political democracy and social progress; iii) the dialectic between the so-called economic efficiency (that of the "market") and the values of equality and solidarity; iv) the definition of the world socialist objective in light of the preceeding reflections.

In the area of world politics, we must advance systems of organization which are more authentically democratic and therefore capable of reorganizing economic relations on an increasingly equal basis. I feel that a high priority should be reorganizing the global system by supporting regional groups including peripheral areas. Setting up regions such as Latin America, the Arab World, Southeast Asia, including China and India, is important. I propose that this objective be the first

priority of a renewed agenda for the "Non-aligned movement." These regionalizations do not exclude others such as Europe or the ex-USSR. The reason for this requirement is simple: the five monopolies in question in our analysis can only be combatted efficiently at this level. Thus, the creation of a truly global economic and financial system, present at each stage (national, regional, global) will soon be possible.

I am aware that transformations begin with the development of the struggle at the foundation of societies. Without the transformation of ideological, political and social systems at their national bases, the discourse of globalization and polarization will remain one of analysts operating post-mortem.