**Samir Amin and the Traditions of the Organic Intellectual**

**by Obadiah Mailafia**

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It was with sadness that we learned of the passing, in a Paris hospital, of the Egyptian-French Marxist economist Samir Amin (1931-2018) on Sunday 12 August, age 87. He had been battling complications from a brain tumour that had crippled him and affected his memory. He was easily one of the most prolific Marxist scholars of the 20th century; a giant who leaves behind the legacy of a permanent influence.

I recall my first meeting with him in Dakar. It was on the occasion of the First Conference of Intellectuals of Africa and the Diaspora in October 2004. The stars on my constellation seemed extraordinarily well-aligned during those days. We had lunch together at the Hotel le Meridien, overlooking the ancient lagoon leading to Gorée Island. Sitting with us at table were the great historian Joseph Ki-Zerbo of Burkina Faso and former UNESCO Director-General Amadou-Mahtar M’Bow. I felt like a highly privileged student in the company of those intellectual glitterati.

Samir Amin, as I remember him, was a humble, soft-spoken, witty and deeply thoughtful person; with penetrating blue eyes and a crown of slightly overgrown, dishevelled white hair. I found him to be a great raconteur and conversationalist. He regaled us with unforgettable anecdotes about some of the interesting people he had met in the course of a remarkable intellectual career.

A particular anecdote that I would not forget was the strange phone call he received one summer evening after he had retired back to his home in the suburbs of Dakar, following a long day in the office. With some palpable anxiety, the voice at the other end asked to confirm if it was Professor Samir Amin at the receiving end. He answered on the affirmative. Somewhat hesitantly, he on his part asked who was calling. The voice replied, “Thomas – Thomas from Ouagadougou”. He was puzzled. Which Thomas could that be? The voice replied, “Thomas Sankara”. He was overwhelmed! He got up on his two feet and solemnly inquired what he could possibly do for the new President of Burkina Faso.

President Sankara replied, to this effect: “Professor, I have been one of your great admirers since my student days. I have read a lot of your works. I am fully in agreement with your diagnoses of imperialism, dependency and underdevelopment. I also subscribe to your prescriptions in terms of the policy of de-linking. Now that we are in power, we need you to urgently come and advise us on how to de-link from world imperialism.”

He confessed to us that he had never been more bewildered in his entire life. He had a difficult time convincing the young president that theoretical discourses should not be taken too literally when it comes to the nitty-gritty of designing economic policies that involve the livelihoods and life-chances of real people in the real world.

Samir Amin was born in Cairo on 3 August 1931 to an Egyptian father and a French mother. Both parents were medical doctors. His has a privileged upper middle class upbringing. He spent his childhood and youth in Port Said, where he attended the local French Lycée. He later proceeded to Paris for his university studies; earning a degree in Political Science from the Institut d’Études Politiques (Sciences Po). He did a graduate degree in statistics and a doctorate in political economy. His dissertation was supervised by the eminent economist François Perroux who was himself deeply sympathetic to the cause of economic and social emancipation of Africa and other underdeveloped regions.

Samir Amin was a prominent student activist who also flirted with the French Communist Party. The Soviet version of communism did not suit his critical intellectual temperament. He left them in favour of a more Maoist and more independent leftism. The France of that epoch was a maelstrom of social and economic upheavals, labour unrest and students’ activism. He would no doubt have been influenced by Quartier Latin intellectuals such as Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Albert Camus, Raymond Aron, Roger Garaudy, Régis Debray, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Nicos Poulantzas and Louis Althusser.

After completing his studies in France, he returned to Egypt in 1957 to serve as an economist in the government’s Institute for Economic Management in Cairo. The unfortunate political repression of communist sympathisers by the regime of Gamal Abdel Nassir forced him to leave his homeland in 1960. He left for Bamako where he was to serve as an Adviser in Economic Planning to the Government of Mali.

In 1963 he was appointed Fellow of the UN regional Institute for Development Planning (IDEP) in Dakar. In 1970 he was promoted to the position of Executive Director of IDEP. During those years he researched and wrote prolifically. In-between his work at the Institute, he co-founded and served as pioneer Executive Secretary of the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA) during the years 1973-1975. In 1980 he retired from IDEP and took up the position of Director of the Third World Forum in Dakar. He also held concurrent professorships at the universities of Poitiers, Dakar and Paris

Samir Amin belonged to the tradition of Radical Political Economy that flowered in the 1950s and 1960s, and associated with scholars such as Paul Baran, Paul Sweezy, Arghiri Emmanuel, Giovanni Arrighi, André Gunder Frank and Immanuel Wallerstein. The American Paul Baran at Stanford goes down in history as the only Marxist economist who ever held a tenured chair in the United States. His Harvard counterpart Paul Sweezy was not so lucky.

They all belonged to a small crop of critical intellectuals who sought to establish a critique of the capitalist system and its attendant imperialism that fostered ultra-right regimes in Latin America and other parts of the developing South. Their research programme aimed to unravel the processes and mechanisms blocking economic development in the Third World while allowing the heartland of actually existing capitalism to flourish. Scholars such as Immanuel Wallerstein focused their analysis on a “world system” paradigm and the contradictions it generates in terms of centre-periphery inequities.
Within Latin America in particular, the Dependencia School flourished as an intellectual effort to explain why natural-resource exporting countries in the south were becoming more impoverished while the industrial north was flourishing. They also sought to understand the mechanisms whereby north-south international economic relations worked to the detriment of the poorest countries. Raul Prebisch at the UN Economic Commission for Latin America (ECLA) was one of the avant-garde intellectuals in that movement. Others included development economists Celso Furtado and Osvaldo Sunkel; and the sociologist Fernando Henrique Cardoso who later became President of Brazil.

Samir Amin was on the forefront of radical economists who called for “a humanist response” to globalisation by building new global institutions that ensure democracy, greater equity, improved livelihoods, social justice and solidarity. Several African scholars caught the bug, among them Daniel Wadada Nabudere in Uganda, Issa Shivji, Justinian Rweyemamu and Bonaventure Swai in Tanzania; Claude Ake, Eskor Toyo and the Madunagus in Nigeria.

An author of 30 books and over 60 journal articles, Samir Amin was the most influential leftist African economist of the twentieth century. More than any other scholar, he used his pen and his acute mental powers to unravel the machinations of imperialism and global hegemony and how they dominate our continent and undermine our development prospects. During his last years he fingered “American hegemony” and its unilateralist global tendencies as the single greatest challenge the world community is facing at present. He proposed a multipolar alliance comprising Europe, Russia, China and India as a counterforce to checkmate American military, economic and political expansionism.

He was not the narrow-minded economist of the type churned out these days from Chicago, Harvard, Stanford, MIT, Oxford and the London School of Economics. The late British political economist Susan Strange decried them as “one-eyed monsters”. Amin approached economics as a branch of the moral sciences and as a tool for liberation and human dignity.

He was interested in everything – in history, philosophy, politics, technology and culture. Although well-trained in statistics, he avoided the kind of modelling that could only lead to perverse conclusions. He understood the idiom of power and how political struggles impact economic life and the life-chances of millions of people on our planet. He famously dismissed political Islam and the Muslim Brotherhood in his native Egypt as a moral subterfuge to short-change the impoverished masses in the Arab world: “We should not just look at the Muslim Brotherhood as a political Islamist power but as a backward movement that rejects workers movements and social justice, preferring to talk about charity as a form to ensure their control over the people”.

Samir Amin was reputed to have coined the term “Eurocentrism”. He decried Europe’s obsessions with its own history, culture and values as being the universal standard of civilisation. From his youth, he belonged to what the French term “l’homme de gauche”: “I considered myself a communist already at secondary school. Probably we did not know exactly what it meant, but we knew it meant two or three things: it meant equality between human beings and between nations, and it meant that this has been done by the Russian revolution, the Soviet Union”.

Samir Amin was prescient enough to see that the neoliberal international economic order in our era of globalisation is reaching a crisis point. He foresaw the current retreat from globalisation as spearheaded by the Trump administration’s revocation of the Trans-Atlantic Trade Partnership (TPP) while launching a new trade war that could plunge the world into catastrophe. As far back as 2012, he had warned that the “neo-liberal phase is in state of collapse…It has to adapt, and whether the new system will be biased to the ruling class or the masses, is still to be revealed”. He once quoted as saying: “We live the autumn of capitalism but not yet the spring of the peoples.”

He received several awards and distinctions during his lifetime, among them the prestigious 2009 Ibn Rushd Prize for Freedom of Thought in Berlin, Germany.

Tributes have come from far and wide. President Macky Sall of Senegal lamented that the world and “contemporary economic thought had lost one of its illustrious figures”. The President of Bolivia, a statesman of the Left, regretted “the passing of our brother Samir Amin, great anti-imperialist, anti-colonialist Marxist intellectual…The legacy of his ideals of social justice will be eternally acknowledged. Immortal.”

The Secretary General of the Communist Party of France, Pierre Laurent, eulogised “the memory and intelligence, the actions, the generosity and the ever renewed energy (of a man) who dedicated his life to the popular movements which seek to transform the world”.

The Indian Marxist economist Prabhat Patnaik of Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi noted that, “His enthusiasm, his laughter, and his remarkable energy for getting people together and pushing them in the quest for revolutionary praxis, was heart-warming, and infectious”.

Samir Amin was the quintessential organic intellectual as classically understood by the Italian Marxist political philosopher Antonio Gramsci. Gramsci defined the vocation of the intellectual as not only that of providing theoretical guidance; but also engagement in praxis that enables the people build a better life and a better future. Amilcar Cabral belonged in that company of elects, as did the immortal Franz Fanon, Eduardo Mondlane and Claude Ake of blessed memory.

We give the final word to the public intellectual Pierre Barbancey, who wrote recently in the Parisian newspaper, L’Humanité: “We will no longer see his frail silhouette, his white silver hair, walking the aisles of the Fête de l’Humanité, engaging in informal conversation with activists or participating in debates…like a fish in water, in the midst of hundreds of thousands of progressives from the four corners of France and from further afield, representing struggles that dot the planet. Samir Amin believed in human emancipation, in the struggle for dignity and freedom…”

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