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What is to be done? The importance of Samir Amin's answer

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ABSTRACT

We consider Samir Amin's last political will and testament as a commission to the international left. From the perspective of geopolitical economy, which has much in common with what Samir called the world-wide law of value and delinking, accepting this commission requires the left to correct course from that on which much of the western left, at least, has been set over the past many decades, losing its way on questions of imperialism and productive organization. We discuss the questions of imperialism and anti-imperialist resistance, contradiction, reform and revolution and political organization as they arise from Samir's text.

KEYWORDS

Samir Amin; geopolitical economy; imperialism; anti-imperialism; law of value; socialism

Samir Amin, a leading scholar and co-founder of the world-systems tradition, died on August 12, 2018. Just before his death, he published, along with close allies, a call for 'workers and the people' to establish a 'fifth international' [<https://www.pambazuka.org/global-south/letter-intent-inaugural-meeting-international-workers-and-peoples>] to coordinate support to progressive movements. To honor Samir Amin's invaluable contribution to world-systems scholarship, we are pleased to present readers with a selection of essays responding to Amin's final message for today's anti-systemic movements. This forum is being co-published between Globalizations [<https://www.tandfonline.com/rglo>], the Journal of World-Systems Research [<http://jwsr.pitt.edu/ojs/index.php/jwsr/issue/view/75>] and Pambazuka News [<https://www.pambazuka.org/>]. Additional essays and commentary can be found in these outlets.

Samir Amin has left us his answer to the eternal political question, 'What is to be done?', as his last political will and testament. In doing so, he has charged us with continuing his unceasing political engagement with events and developments world-wide, his sober exploration of the possibilities for human emancipation, his dogged development of Marxism in the face of the new demands of history, and of ruthless criticism of established orthodoxies. I want to argue here that if we are to take up this commission, we need to recognise that what he has left us with constitutes a long overdue indictment of the broad direction of the left, particularly the dominant Western left and Western Marxism, over recent decades.

Something is clearly wrong when the surfeit of opportunities for left mobilization offered by four decades of neoliberalism, successive financial crises, mounting inequality, widespread overburdening and hopelessness are foregone in country after country, and grasped instead by fearsome far right formations which cut figures more closely resembling the fascist right of the interwar years than any right political formation since. Something is also clearly wrong when the large swaths of the

Western left and Western Marxism cannot countenance the further advance of multipolarity, the shift in the world economy's centre of gravity away from the west for the first time in the history of the capitalist world, without political confusion or even hostility instead of considering its anti-imperialist potential.

A left reconstruction is urgent and that is what Samir's text seeks. It is a short text, one to be read against the background of his oeuvre and life. And inevitably, of course, against that of our own ideas.

Geopolitical economy or the worldwide law of value

Those against which I offer the present reading fall under the rubric of what I have recently dubbed geopolitical economy (Desai, 2013), a new approach to understanding relations between nations in a capitalist world, one that draws on Samir's work. Geopolitical economy insists on the materiality of nations, on the essential economic role states must play in the capitalist world. Capitalist states must manage capitalism's contradictions through domestic and international actions, the latter including imperialism, formal and informal. Socialist ones of course have a clear economic role, not only in organising a planned economy but also, at the interface of its interaction with the wider world economy dominated by capitalist and imperialist states, limiting their ability to externalise their contradictions.

As such, geopolitical economy challenges the prevailing cosmopolitan ideas about the world economy such as free trade, globalization, US hegemony or empire. In these, either no state matters or only one does. They are not theories but ideologies. Just as dominant ideologies within societies reflect the interests of the dominant classes, so internationally, the dominant ideologies reflect those of the dominant countries. Their function is to inform and justify a world economy opened to dominant capitalist countries' goods and capital and to serve its labour and raw material needs, an openness necessitated precisely by capitalism's contradictions and imposed by imperialism.

However, wishes not being horses even for the most powerful countries, this is not the end of the story. Imperialism is resisted, making capitalist international relations dialectical. In the dialectic of uneven and combined development that drives them, dominant capitalist nations seek to create and maintain the unevenness of world capitalist development that favours them. While colonies cannot resist and are forced open, there are many countries with the power and will to do so in the only way possible: state directed or 'combined' development using protection, industrial policy etc. This was true of the industrialization of the first countries to challenge Britain's original industrial and imperial dominance back in the 1870s, which had already made the world multipolar. It was also true of the actually existing communisms beginning with Russia and the attempts at national development in the early post-war decades. And it is true of the rise of China and other emerging economies today. Productive capacity has spread only in this fashion, not through markets let alone, as some Western Marxists suggested, via imperialism (Warren, 1980). Such 'combined development' has also ensured the further advance of multipolarity.

Each phase of this necessarily national spread of productive capacity has constrained the imperial core of capitalism, narrowing its options, forcing it into national containers and making it more susceptible to working people's demands at home. After 1917, 'communist' combined development became an option as well as the earlier capitalist forms, and this new form was at once more popular and more relevant to development without imperial power and therefore to the Third World.

Geopolitical economy as briefly outlined here was not only influenced by Samir's extensive oeuvre, including his view of imperialism and anti-imperialism and the critical idea of 'de-linking', but also entered into our intellectual engagement over the years.

In September 2008, while major financial institutions were crashing in the Anglosphere, I was about to begin my presentation at the social forum in Malmö, Sweden, when a thin white-haired man, at once unassuming and arresting, entered the room and sat down. I spoke on 'When was Globalization? Origin and End of a US Strategy'. Sceptics had already refuted the main claims of globalization discourse, I explained, undermining the notion it was some new phenomenon sweeping all before it. My own argument built on this refutation, asking why, then, did we begin talking about globalization in the 1990s. My answer was that it was a particular strategy of US dominance aimed, in particular, at lifting capital controls so dollar-denominated financial bubbles could shore up the dollar. As I delivered my talk, I could see the white-haired man listening attentively, nodding agreement at key points. After it was over, we began talking, first in meeting room and then walking out. He expressed complete agreement with my argument, adding points to bolster it here and there, particularly on matters relating to the financialized US economy. With so much to agree about, at some point I had to say: 'You know, I don't know your name'. His answer, Samir Amin, was, as you can imagine, one of the most wonderful surprises of my life. His agreement and approval had already been very gratifying then and mean more as time goes on and I realise certain critical truths more keenly.

Many years later, we had the chance to interact more deeply and broadly at one of the regular workshops of the *Historisches Kritisches Wörterbuch des Marxismus* in Berlin, this time on the 'Widersprüche des Nationalen' (Contradictions of the National). In long conversations over several days of formal sessions, lunches, dinners and coffees in the halls and gardens of the sprawling conference complex, we explored our extensive common ground, tossing our ideas, critiques of more and less politically distant thinkers and pivotal facts on which we built our arguments back and forth, each toss refining them a little more. Our agreements became particularly important in the sessions because Samir and I, along with Michael Löwy, inevitably ended up resisting and rolling back the general disdain for matters national. I still cherish the memory of Samir's interjection after a long response I made to a question: 'I completely agree with Radhika!'

In our correspondence thereafter, when I sent him a particularly critical intervention of mine (Desai, 2016), Samir said, *inter alia*, 'I loved your insisting on what you call "the geopolitical economy"'. I call it: "the law of value operating at the global level of the capitalist/imperialist system"' (personal correspondence 10 June 2016). Samir was right. We used differing terminology. We approached matters differently given our different backgrounds, personal and intellectual, and we explored different things beyond the core of our agreement. However, the broad thrust of our thinking, trying to give a historical materialist account of the workings of the capitalist world, understanding imperialism but also giving anti-imperialism its due, putting class as well as nation in the frame of historical materialist analysis, was the same. So were our purposes: to identify political and policy imperatives and recommendations for advances towards socialism.

Revolution and anti-imperialism or why combined development is revolutionary

The most valuable thing about Samir's proposal for a new international is his insistence that it be one of workers *and peoples*. In this insistence lies his challenge to the Western left's and Western Marxism's critical political about-turn, away from the abiding concern with imperialism that characterized twentieth century Marxism and towards an analysis of 'capitalism' shorn of imperialism.

This about turn has cost these currents their purchase on politics over recent decades. In the early post-war decades, analysis of imperialism dominated left discussion. After all, contrary to Second International expectations, amid the crisis of imperialist capitalism that issued in the ‘Thirty Years’ Crisis’ of 1914–45, the Russian and Chinese Revolutions inaugurated the cycle of revolutions, socialist and national, that rolled back imperialism in the ‘backward’ parts of Europe and in Asia. The fate of the Second and Third Worlds dominated discussion amid a general ‘revolt against the West’ (as one historian characterized the twentieth century, Barraclough, 1964).

Soon after, however, the Western left distanced itself from the concept of imperialism, not because anyone had demonstrated that it was unnecessary but perhaps as a manifestation of the ebbing of anti-imperialism (Patnaik, 1995). It was not just that Western Marxism now asserted that ‘Capitalism does not need a subordinated hinterland or periphery, though it will use and profit from it if it exists’ (Brewer, 1990, p. 57) or even that some rather notoriously, took to considering it a ‘pioneer of capitalism’ (Warren, 1980). Far more on the left considered it a non-issue, a distraction from class and socialism, or worse, an affliction they termed ‘Third Worldism’: the weak-mindedness of those so easily impressed by ‘the image of guerrillas with coloured skins amid tropical vegetation’ (Hobsbawm, 1994, p. 443) as to privilege the revolutionary potential of Third World peasants over that of First World workers. Dreams of Third World Revolution, national or social, were futile or perverse or even dangerous (the views ran the gamut of Hirschman’s list of arguments against change: futility, perversity, jeopardy). By seeking to defy the ‘global’ logic of capital, Third World countries only increased ‘pressures to external political compromise and internal political degeneration’ that emanate from a world capitalist market dominated by the advanced industrial world (Brenner, 1977, p. 92). With no option but to obey western capitalism, the anti-imperialist Third World, having once been the Prince of Denmark in Marxism’s and the left’s *Hamlet*, was now written out of the script. Without it, no wonder the Western left and Western Marxism appear to have been running a production of the absurdist *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* instead.

This political about turn had at least two major effects on the western left. Internationally, as western aggression intensified in the wake of the disintegration of the Soviet Union, beginning with the dismemberment of Yugoslavia, large parts of the western left aligned with western powers against an array of Third World governments. This was done in the name of ‘humanitarian intervention’ against ‘brutal dictators’ (Johnstone, 2002 is a still relevant critique) or, as lately in the case of Venezuela, by failing to choose between western aggression and an allegedly incompetent, corrupt, and authoritarian government (e.g. Hetland, 2019, for a critique see Martin, 2019). No wonder Western Marxists marked Russian Revolution’s centenary remarkably ambiguously, seeking, as one representative volume had it, to understand but also ‘transcend’ its legacy and ‘look forward more than back’ (Panitch & Albo, 2017, ix). This amounted to depriving the record of national and social revolutions since 1917 and anti-imperialism itself, of any role in socialism. This stance leaves so much of the left, in the west and elsewhere, standing ineffectually on the sidelines, unable to get a handle on a world being transformed by the further ebbing of imperialism. Its most prominent signs include the rise of China and other emerging economies, the fissures in the western alliance and the ability of so many countries, whether Russia or China or even Italy, to defy western designs.

On the other hand, having written the actual history of revolutions out of the script, such a Marxism is also inevitably trapped in a magical conception of revolution at home despite the most propitious conditions created by four decades of neoliberalism. During these decades, neoliberalism failed to restore the dynamism of western capital and end the growth slowdown it entered in the 1970s. It was, moreover, able to impose the costs of its prescriptions on working people and so many Third World countries. Despite this, and though Western Marxism hardly lacks erudition

and intellectual fire-power, it is unable to light the way for the left. This failure has left working people more susceptible to appeals of the right than the left and Third World peoples without solidarity.

The left's economic agenda remains confined to questions of redistribution, void of any plan for a socialist reconstruction of the *productive economy*. In its place there reigns a vague opposition to planning and state direction and an equally vague commitment to small scale enterprises, whether worker owned or cooperative, stances which can only be labelled Proudhonist (Desai, 2011). Any proper socialist organization of the economy would require a sober assessment of the actual sources of such productive dynamism that capitalist economies have demonstrated, sources that are less likely to be located in the market than in the state. It would require an assessment of the achievements, mistakes and failures of the varieties of actually existing communisms in the face of imperialism. And, last but not least, it would require appreciating how imperial relationships underpin western productive capacities and material living standards and what it would take to replace them with an egalitarian, domestically and internationally just and, of course, sustainable economy (Desai, 2017). So far all this lies beyond the Western left and Western Marxist pale.

Today, however, with the West trapped in secular stagnation and China and other emerging economies growing faster, the frontiers of imperialism as being pushed father back and, perhaps because of that, interest in imperialism is growing once again (Cope, 2012; Desai, 2013; Ness & Cope, 2015; Patnaik & Patnaik, 2016; Smith, 2016). To be sure, there are many problems with the pattern of this growth China and the emerging economies, problems that arise at least as much from imperialist attempt to undermine it as from domestic power structures. Rectifying them will, however, increase the progressive potential of this development which, even in this distorted form, is narrowing the options of western imperialist capitalism and making economies more national and therefore more susceptible to democratic pressures.

Samir's warning against the degeneration of anti-imperial struggles into 'reactionary backward-looking illusions expressed by religious or pseudo ethics' is critical here. On the one hand, there is no doubt that in many Third World countries lacking the political capacity to challenge imperialism through socialist forms national capitalisms have taken root. There, these reactionary ideologies have typically been the hand-maidens of an intensification of capitalist power and control. However, they remain, for reasons indicated by Samir, volatile and unstable, not least because they cannot fulfil the aspirations they must arouse to get to and/or remain in power. On the other, while these Third World capitalist classes certainly expect to 'construct a "developed" national capitalism capable of actively shaping the international environment in their favour', popular pressures demand a more and more reformed capitalism and a far broader based prosperity than these capitalisms can provide. This is certainly my analysis of the political dynamics of capitalist India over recent decades (Desai, 2004, 2010b, 2014).

By insisting on placing peoples and nations, alongside workers, as protagonists of socialism, Samir signalled the critical need to re-integrate capitalism and imperialism, class struggle and international struggle in a single perspective. Unless this is done, the progressive potential of emerging multipolarity cannot be realized and internationalism can only be perverted into an endorsement of inevitably imperialist cosmopolitan ideas and practices.

Contradiction

Samir never flinched from facing up to the immensity of capitalist power today. He outlines it in the text before us, referring *inter alia* to the extreme centralization of power in the hands of financial

oligarchies, the ‘domestication of the main right-wing and left-wing parties, the unions and the organization of so-called civil society’, the hollowing out of democracy, totalitarian control over society, and the intensification of the exploitation of the Third World amounting to a practical ‘recolonization’ of the world. However, he also never lost the sense of contradiction so central to Marxism and so lost on so many contemporary Marxists in the west. He concluded the account of the main dimensions of capitalist power with the observations that this immense power was also ‘fragile’ and that we are living in the ‘autumn’ of capitalism. Samir also considered some, at least, of these dimensions of (apparent) power symptoms of this fragility and senility such as the military control the west seeks over the world. It was more swagger than power.

This insistence on contradiction in a voice as authoritative as Samir’s is critically important today. The same neoliberal decades over which the left gave up its concern for imperialism also witnessed a rejection of the very notion of contradiction. This move was ultimately rooted in the incursion of neoclassical economics into Marxism in the late nineteenth century. As is well-known, neoclassical economics emerged in the 1870s as a response to working class organization as well as the intellectual threat of Marxism and other radical currents. It was theoretically and methodologically antithetical to Marxism. Despite this, already in the late 19th century, intellectuals trained in neoclassical economics first, arriving at Marxism later, sought to fit the latter into the former. The result was to replace Marx’s critique of political economy with a ‘Marxist economics’ which owed more to neoclassical economics than Marx. No wonder its practitioners found Marx had a problem with ‘transforming’ values into prices, no wonder they think there is no demand problem or that the rate of profit does not fall (Desai, 2010a, 2016, 2017). This trend remained contested for decades. By the 1970s, however, Western Marxism had, in any case, vacated the ground of the materialist analysis of society for the academically greener pastures of the ‘social’ and ‘cultural’ (as if Marxism could permit them to be examined in isolation from the material). It now took Marxist economics’ word when it came to understanding matters ‘economic’ (also not separated by Marx from the rest of the historical social formation).

With the erasure of Marx’s more esoteric but essential conception of the contradictions of capital accumulation, the western left also abandoned the wider idea of contradiction: that the ruling class may try to achieve many objectives – increase profits, intensify Third World exploitation, control dissent – but it may not succeed. In place of a volatile and contradiction-ridden capitalist order that Marx portrayed, the Western left first created an idol of a capitalism with the productive powers of Prometheus and the staying power of Methuselah and then worshipped at its altar. It is bereft of the wider sense that, to an important extent, capitalists are in the position of the half-trained sorcerer’s apprentice, not in control of the spirits they have conjured up and that understanding this, identifying the precise points at which capitalist control is failing, is critical. It is needed to identify the most effective lines of working class and anti-imperialist advance and so the left is prepared to defend humanity from the often devastating consequences of these contradictions.

Instead, the western left chastises those who speak of contradictions for ‘predicting nine of the past five recessions’. It is unmindful or uncaring (one does not know which is worse) that it is paraphrasing Paul Samuelson, who defanged Keynes’s radical critique of neoclassical economics (Desai, 2009; Desai & Freeman, 2009) to turn it into ‘bastard Keynesianism’, on the predictions of the stock market. Settled in these questionable convictions, the western left produces tome after tome attesting to the ‘global’ power of capital and the ‘hegemonic’ power of the US or the West.

What could be more critical, at a time when the West’s entanglement in the tendencies prolonging the ‘Long Downturn’ seems more intractable than ever, when it cannot grow even at anaemic rates without the aid of continuously inflated financial bubbles, when many Third World countries are

growing faster than ever, when western purchase on international events is slipping, when cracks in the European Union are lengthening and widening, to speak of the contradictions, fragility and senility of imperialist capitalism?

Reform and revolution

Which brings me the matter of the stark opposition between revolution and reform that prevails on the left and which Samir also rejected. Such an opposition could not have been farther from the minds of Marx or Engels or any serious revolutionary. The ten demands listed in *The Communist Manifesto* or the Bolshevik call for 'Peace, Bread and Land' or Chinese communist land reform could hardly appear more 'reformist'. However, demands *per se* are neither reformist or revolutionary but situations make them so. The most modest demand, if the ruling class is unable or unwilling to fulfil it and provided the people are sufficiently organized to say, well, in that case, we'll fulfil it ourselves, can become revolutionary.

Revolutionaries like Samir remembered on the one hand that reforms can strengthen the ability of working people to fight for more (Patnaik, 2009) and on the other that each reform – whether the welfare state in the west or the seemingly paltry provision of providing 150 days of employment to one member of every poor family in India, in so far as it reduces the commodification of labour and constitutes even a small constraint on the power and prerogatives of capital, is an advance. On the other hand, Samir never discounted what popular pressures could achieve even in bourgeois nationalist Third World countries: as a recent obituary has it, he went to work for the governments of Egypt and Mali in the 1960s because he believed that 'given an appropriately enlightened government and adequate social sanction, trajectories of development that advanced social good could be engineered even within non-socialist economies' (Chandrashekhara, 2018).

Of course, such gains in capitalist countries are fragile and, as is well known, were set back during the neoliberal decades. However, their significance, notwithstanding these setbacks, was part of the reason Samir took a very long-term view of revolution. It was something that occurred in chapters and episodes in different parts of the world at different times, that ebbed and flowed, advanced and retreated, would take centuries to complete but is *ongoing*.

Organization

For some time, I've seen the western left's problems as being its captivity in what I've called Proudhonist economics and network politics. The first, already addressed above, rejects any conception of a general organization of society and economy, otherwise known as planning, to replace their market organization. This amounts to accepting society's capitalist and imperialist organization by default. I've already dealt with this problem above. Suffice it to add here that, obviously, in a socialist society such general organization has to be democratic and decentralised.

Network politics, for its part, rejects the only way this can be achieved – through the general organization of people in a party or something matching its organizational capacities. Instead, 'movements', 'horizontal' rather than vertical structures considered inherently anti-democratic are favoured. Samir is absolutely right to insist on establishing an organization, not just a movement, not just internationally but within countries.

We live in times that recall Yeats's ominous forebodings in 'The Second Coming': the 'falcon' of the capitalist world can no longer hear the capitalist falconer, the 'best lack all conviction' while 'the worst are full of passionate intensity'. From the US and Britain to Europe, from Brazil and Argentina

to Egypt and the Philippines, the harvest of discontent sown by over four decades of neoliberalism is being reaped by the worst the right can produce. The left is rudderless and needs re-invention. That is what Samir is calling for. And that requires retracing our steps back to the tradition of revolutionary communism which stretches in a single line from the popular currents of the seventeenth and eighteenth century revolutions, including the Haitian, through the 19th century upheavals whether the European 1888, Taiping Rebellion or the Paris Commune to the revolutionary situation created worldwide by the first and second world wars in Europe and the revolutions against imperialism that rolled out after 1917. That is why Samir thought we should study them.

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