# **Samir Amin: A Pioneering Marxist and Third World Activist**

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Samir Amin was a towering figure of radical political economy - known globally, but particularly recognized and appreciated in Africa. When Amin passed away on August 12th, 2018, the outpouring of grief in the form of the plentiful obituaries was moving. Notable in the many obituaries was the consistent reference to Amin’s infectious commitment and energy. He was a socialist from an early age and was concerned with responding to and building emancipatory social movements throughout his life. This shone through in his research as well, which dealt with questions of persistent global inequalities and why capitalism’s penetration to the Third World led to economic polarization globally and underdevelopment in the periphery.

Few scholars oppose disciplinary conventions and boundaries the way that Samir Amin did. He was an economist, but he opposed the mainstream of the field. He was a Marxist, but he was deeply critical of many of his Marxist contemporaries. Though he coined the term Eurocentrism and thereby contributed in important ways to post-colonial literature, he did believe that there were universal material truths, such as the law of value. While he was unwavering in his independent beliefs about what was right, he was incredibly open and spent large parts of his life building inclusive and radical scholarly and activist communities that will live on after his passing. As will his theoretical contributions to the social sciences and humanities. When evaluating Amin’s legacy, it’s important to discuss his activism and intellectual contributions alongside each other. He achieved more than most activists and academics in both spheres, but the combination is what sets him apart.

**RADICAL FROM THE START: FROM PORT SAID TO PARIS**

When Amin was six years old, he saw a child picking up garbage from the street to eat in his hometown Port Said in Egypt. Why, he asked his mother, was the boy doing that? “Because the society we have is bad,” his mother said. “Then I’ll change society,” Amin promised (Amin, 2006:6). This determination stayed with Amin throughout his lifetime. By the time he was in secondary school he already considered himself a communist. As he later recounted in an interview, “Probably we did not know exactly what it meant, but we knew it meant [...] equality between human beings and between nations.” (Zeilig, 2017) Although he was pressured by his teachers to study physics when he finished high school in Paris due to his exceptional math skills, he was determined to study law in order to go on and become an economist (Amin, 2014b). Amin’s choice at the time rested on the consideration that as an economist he would be able to do professional work more closely related to his activism.

Amin was born in 1931 in Port Said to an Egyptian Coptic father and French-German mother. His mother’s side of the family were descendants of French revolutionaries, while his father’s side was Coptic, upper class, left-oriented, anti-monarchy and anti-colonial. His parents were both medical doctors and came from a bourgeois society. They were not socialist per se, but had a “social vision of problems,” which meant they never thought poverty or inequality was natural, but rather explained to Amin that society was poorly constructed (Amin, 2006:5).

Amin was a teenager at the end of the second world war, when decolonisation movements were gathering momentum. State-directed development was underway in many developing countries, a socialist Soviet Union was an important global influence, and even advanced countries were experimenting with various forms of economic planning. Many of his core ideas were formed in the 1950s and 60s, when pan-Africanists like Kwamah Nkrumah ran Ghana and Julius Nyerere Tanzania, when General Nasser was transforming the Middle East, when liberation movements thrived from South Africa to Algeria, and when the Bandung conference offered optimism for those that opposed colonialism and neocolonialism.

Amin moved to Paris to finish high school and eventually do his PhD under the radical structuralist economist Francois Perroux at Science Po. He defended his PhD thesis in 1957, which was later published as *Accumulation on a World Scale* (Amin, 1974, French edition 1969). In it, he unpacked contemporary theories of development and economics, from modernization theory to marginalism, and laid out an ambitious alternative agenda that he would spend his life-time fulfilling through his prolific writing.

Amin’s intellectual contributions since then have been broad, spanning from history, politics, philosophy, sociology of culture and religion, anthropology, and economics. He wrote on topics ranging from imperialism, unequal exchange, critiques of contemporary approaches to development, the relevance of Maoist thought, Islam, modernity, to agrarian change. While he is a political economist, he also made important contributions to the history of civilisations, for example in his formulation of the tributary mode of production, of which he considered feudalism to be a part. This was in contrast to what he considered to be the limited Western-centric belief that there are only three modes of production, namely slave, feudal and capitalist.[[2]](#footnote-2)

While many Marxists might consider Amin’s work on the law of value his most important contribution (e.g. Foster, 2011), Amin’s work and influence is arguably broader than that. The writings that perhaps come the closest to the agenda set out in Amin’s thesis - of both exposing weaknesses in contemporary approaches to development and presenting a coherent alternative way of understanding the development of capitalism and its effects on the Third World - are *Eurocentrism* (2009b, originally published in 1988) and *Unequal Development* (1976, French edition 1973)[[3]](#footnote-3). Many of Amin’s publications can be considered extensions or further elaborations of each of these two books.[[4]](#footnote-4) An important underlying thread tying these two core contributions together is Amin’s focus on nationhood, which is rare for Marxists who tend to see the world divided by class. Paying attention to the nation, in addition to class, enabled Amin to see unequal exchange and eurocentrism, when other Marxists did not.

Amin wrote about dependency long before it became influential. His PhD from 1957, which pointed to the polarizing tendencies of globalization, was a sort of “anti-Rostowian manifesto before Rostow had even written his renowned *Stages of Economics Growth*,” as Amin himself put it in an interview (Kvangraven, 2017: 15). His ideas developed during a time when developmentalists, Marxists and structuralists across the world were putting forward new and competing explanations for the polarizing tendencies of capitalism (e.g. Prebisch, 1950; Myrdal, 1957; Baran, 1957; Frank, 1967). At this time, there was a particular interest in re-interpreting Marx from a Third World perspective, from scholars in India (Kosambi, 1956; Habib, 1963; Sharma, 1965) to Latin America (Marini, 1969; dos Santos, 1968). Though, theoretically, Amin was perhaps closest to Paul Baran (1957). Despite many differences with other dependency theorists, Amin did collaborate on several occasions with Andre Gunder Frank, Immanuel Wallerstein and Giovanni Arrighi, and by the 1970s they had become known within academia as the “Gang of Four” (Amin, 2005).

Amin first met Arrighi and Frank in Paris in 1968 and went on to visit Frank in Santiago, Chile in 1971, where he was also introduced to Theotonio Dos Santos and other dependency theorists (Frank, 2000). Amin then went on to invite Frank, Dos Santos and others to a major international conference that he organized in Dakar, Senegal in 1972, with the explicit goal of generating debate about dependency theory among African scholars. While dependency theory is often associated with Latin American analysis, Amin illustrated its importance for African development, and made important contributions to the tradition.

**AMIN AS AN AFRICAN, PAN-AFRICAN AND THIRD WORLDIST**

While Amin was brought up in Port Said, his subsequent education and his own inclinations made him a citizen of the world - or the Third World. Rather than having a fixed homeland, Amin’s chosen home was linked to his commitment to a political project. Indeed he was a “Pan-Africanist in physical and conceptual terms” (Chandrasekhar, 2018). He was not concerned with Western universities, but always welcomed invitations from Third World institutions (Shivji, 2018).

Though Amin was a Marxist, he was also a realist. After his PhD he was involved in a lot of public planning as he joined other radical scholars working with newly independent governments, hoping to influence them to pursue policies that would promote employment, poverty reduction and equality. He worked for the Egyptian Institute for Economic Management while also being a member of the Communist Party in 1957-1960, before being forced into exile by Egypt’s Abdel Nasser’s growing repression of communists. This led Amin to a career spent largely in other parts of Africa. He worked for Mali’s Ministry of Planning in 1960-63 and as Director of the UN African Institute of Economic Development and Planning (L'Institut Africain de Développement Economique et de Planification, or IDEP) in Dakar in 1963-1970 - a pan-African institution meant to train and deepen the knowledge base of post-colonial African technical attaches, bureaucrats and leaders. In addition to his jobs in various governments, he offered advice to Thomas Sankara in Burkina Faso, Julius Nyerere in Tanzania, among others. His choice to work with governments illustrates his general conviction that it was possible to push for trajectories of more autonomous development even within the current system.

Amin’s commitment to the political project of fighting for socialism and emancipation set him apart from most other academic Marxists. Amin left IDEP to found the Third World Forum (Forum de Tiers Monde) in 1973. The Forum was a network for discussions related to anti-systemic developmental thought with participation by intellectuals from across Africa, Latin America and Asia. Later, the World Forum on Alternatives arose as a global offshoot of the Third World Forum, which was leading the alter-globalization movement from 1997 onwards. In 1999, the Forum organized the first anti-Davos meeting in Davos, which involved 50 major trade union, peasant, women’s and environmental organizations. That was where the idea to organize the first World Social Forum (WSF) arose.

In parallel, Amin was instrumental in setting up the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA) and he used IDEP’s infrastructure to host the first CODESRIA meetings. It took a few years to secure funding and set up the institutional structure for CODESRIA and the efforts of a few people who supported Amin became important. Along with Amin, Thandika Mkandawire, who became one of the deputy assistants in 1975, also played an important role in shaping the development of CODESRIA up until the mid-1990s. By 1979 they started to convince some of the Scandinavian countries to donate money.[[5]](#footnote-5)

CODESRIA then quickly became an important vehicle of radical social science research and analysis in Africa, and currently has more than 4000 active members. Amin was its first Executive Secretary and in his role he nurtured radical scholarship on Africa, such as that of Walter Rodney on Europe’s role in the underdevelopment of African countries and Issa Shivji on internal factors, class and race in Tanzania. In a broader political context, Amin and CODESRIA also connected with the Latin American institutions such as the Latin American Council of Social Sciences (CLACSO) and the UN Economic Commission for Latin America (ECLA) early on, and later with institutions across the Global South, including International Development Economics Associates (IDEAs) in India.

In addition to Amin and Mkandawire, many radical African academics were associated with CODESRIA at some point or another, such as the Nigerian political scientist Claude Ake, the Cameroonian historian and philosopher Achille Mbembe, the Ugandan academic Mahmood Mamdani, the late Zimbabwean scholar of agrarian development Sam Moyo, the Nigerian political scientist and international policy maker Adeboyo Olukoshi, the Kenyan anthropologist Abdullah Bujra and the Ethiopian sociologist Zenebeworke Tadesse. An important role of CODESRIA was to support African scholars and provide a fruitful and open intellectual community for radical and interdisciplinary scholarship.

Moreover, Amin was interested in empowering national movements that would be capable of countering the logic of capitalism. For example, he was closely associated with the communist movement in Senegal and several NGO movements looked to him for help and guidance. For Amin, Pan Africanism was a project of the oppressed of Africa against imperialism. He emphasized that it was not a celebration of African people, but a collective resistance.

Amin also devoted much of his later years to political work within the World Social Forum. Although he put a lot of energy into building and strengthening the global social movement, he did not always manage to gather significant support for concrete policy platforms. The most significant points of contention were the Porto Alegre Manifesto (2005) and the Bamako Appeal (2006) - both documents that Samir Amin played a leading role in developing.

There is inevitable tension within global social justice movements, between those who want to move toward a global united front that can mobilize effectively for radical change, and those who prefer horizontalist, non-hierarchical and flexible networks without formal organization (Chase-Dunn and Nagy, 2018). While Amin found himself at the side mobilizing for radical change and believed it was more important to rally movements around core principles rather than decentralizing social movements[[6]](#footnote-6), his efforts were met with much criticism, especially regarding the hierarchical and closed process that led to the statements he produced with his comrades (Waterman, 2006; Conway, 2013).

The Porto Alegre Manifesto was strongly criticized for its process and lack of representativity, as it was produced by 18 light-skinned men and one African woman, and did not represent the broader WSF membership (Conway, 2013). The Bamako Appeal produced the following year was slightly better. The so-called *Conference of the Peoples of Bandung* met on the eve of the 2006 WSF in Bamako, Mali, led by two of the WSF international council members, Amin and Francois Houtart. While the Bamako Appeal came about through a slightly more diverse and participatory process than the Porto Alegre Manifesto, it was still a “document *produced* by a tiny group of individuals, *complemented* by an invited audience, and *edited* by the original group, and ‘accepted’ [...] at (not by) the WSF” (Waterman, 2006:10, emphasis in original). It was thereafter issued for endorsement, not discussion.

The Bamako Appeal aimed at consolidating the gains made at the social forums by “defining and promoting alternatives capable of mobilising social and political forces. The goal [was] a radical transformation of the capitalist system”.[[7]](#footnote-7) It was widely perceived as an attempt to push the WSF to more tangible deliberation and action (Waterman 2007), and was controversial, to say the least. While it was warmly welcomed by communists and marxists (Pleyers, 2007), it was subject to intense criticism by WSF participants and activists (Waterman, 2007; Conway, 2013), some of which considered it an attempt to “reinstate the centrality of the nation state to the project of social emancipation” (Waterman, 2006:2) and others who saw it as a legacy of the old left of the twentieth century that tried to fit the diversity of local struggles into their own pre-defined blueprints (Barchiesi et al., 2007).[[8]](#footnote-8)

**A CONTRARIAN MARXIST: ACCUMULATION ON A WORLD SCALE**

While it is common to classify Amin as a neo-Marxist, Amin (2010a) called himself a ‘creative Marxist’. For him, “To be a ‘Marxist’ is to continue the work that Marx merely began, even though that beginning was of unequalled power. It is not to stop from Marx, but to start from him.” (p. 9-10). His problem with Western Marxists was that they did not try to go beyond Marx and therefore were blind to the imperialist nature of historical capitalism. Given the importance of Marxiology for many Marxists, Amin undoubtedly attracted much critique for his analysis - undoubtedly more critique from Marxists than from the mainstream economists who were more likely to simply ignore him.

While Amin, Arrighi, Frank and Wallerstein agreed on many issues, it is worth noting that there were also important differences between them. As noted in Amin et al. (1982), a book co-authored by the “Gang of Four,” they agreed on the unit of analysis being the capitalist world-economy, the importance of the global division of labor, the intertwinement of political, economic and social variables, and the historical objectives of world socialism, democracy and equality. However, they also had several disagreements, some of which were substantial and with important political implications, but most often it was more a matter of emphasis.

For example, while Amin and Arrighi were more concerned with the specificity of the latest so-called (Kondratief) wave in order to understand contemporary crises, Frank and Wallerstein were concerned with establishing the recurrence of a pattern throughout history (Amin et al., 1982). The approach of Wallerstein and Frank led Amin and Arrighi to criticize them for “excessive economism” (p. 234). Furthermore, Amin’s approach to delinking differs from the other three. While Amin considered it to be an effective approach to promote autonomous development, the other three saw it either as an ineffective strategy or as another form of mercantilism. Another faultline was their difference in approach to imperialism. While Wallerstein, Frank and Arrighi doubted the utility of a separate term or unit of analysis to understand modern imperialism or neocolonialism, Amin was closer to the position of Hobson and Lenin, as he believed that imperialism came into existence in the late nineteenth century and continued to shape capitalist (uneven) development.

Amin placed imperialism within capitalism firmly within the framework of the Labour Theory of Value through his theory of unequal exchange. In *Accumulation on a World Scale,* Amin mapped the mechanisms through which value flowed from the periphery to the core, maintaining an international division of labor and a geographically uneven distribution of wealth (Amin, 1974). For Amin, capitalism was always a global system that was dependent on the polarisation between the centre and periphery. He drew on Baran and Sweezy (1966) in the development of his theory of “imperialist rent” based on what he called the emerging law of worldwide value. Amin’s work on imperialism can roughly be divided into two phases, the early phase (1957-1970) when he was preoccupied with the general theory of capitalist accumulation and the role of imperialism in this process, and post-1970 when he begins to write extensively on the political history of imperialism, communism and national liberation movements (Ahmad, 2018).

Amin (1976) distinguished between the autocentric accumulation that takes place in advanced capitalist countries which promoted expanded reproduction of capital, and extraverted accumulation in the peripheral countries that does not. Furthermore, he argued that the advanced degree of centralization of capital made it worthwhile to speak of a system of globalized and financialized oligopolies, based on the imperialism of the triad of the US, Europe and Japan (see also Foster, 2013). He argued that the falling rates of growth in the capitalist centre since the 1970s had driven an intensification of imperialist rent and the imperialist triad was dominating the world system through five monopolies, namely the control of 1) technology, 2) access to natural resource, 3) finance, 4) the global media, and 5) the means of mass destruction (Amin, 2014a). In his view, this form of monopoly capitalism was different from the competitive capitalism Marx observed, and particularly ruinous for the peripheral countries.

While the strength of Amin’s approach lies in linking imperialism explicitly to the process of capital accumulation, he has been critiqued for failing to “take into account the nature of exploitation and class forces” (Barone, 1982: 10). Generally, Amin’s theory of imperialism has been dismissed by Marxists who criticize the methodological limitations that come from restricting analysis to the sphere of circulation (see e.g. Barone, 1982).

**Amin’s Conceptualization of Unequal Exchange**

Amin’s line of reasoning on imperialism led to the development-underdevelopment dichotomy that Amin went on to expand on in *Unequal Development* (1976) and elsewhere. In it, Amin exposed how uneven development, or historically evolved exploitative structures, leads to unequal exchange, which leads to continued polarization and increased inequality. Broadly, unequal exchange theories attempt to explain factor price non-equalization in the world economy, where factor price refers to the remuneration to labor or other primary non-produced factors. The cheap labor attracts foreign investment. Amin derives his analysis of unequal exchange from the idea that a unit of labor power (otherwise similar) is valued less in the periphery than in the core, building on Prebisch’s (1950) observation of the rigidity of wages in the core. The proposition also followed from Kalecki’s (1954) analysis that a rise in the degree of monopoly within the core meant a squeeze on the primary commodity producers in the periphery. This in turn meant that the value added over a specific period by a unit of labor in the periphery was counted as less than the equivalent in the core.

This phenomenon has also been called *superexploitation* - the situation where the workers in the South are exploited by local capitalist classes and exposed to unequal exchange relations (Amin, 1976; Amin, 2018a; Marini, 1978; Bambirra, 1978). While it was Arghiri Emmanuel (1972, French edition 1962) who first developed an explicit theory of unequal exchange, in Amin’s critique of Emmanuel he provides his own key contribution to the literature. Amin’s reconstruction of Emmanuel’s thesis involves first dropping the insistence of wages being an independent variable and second, based on this, the recognition that wages themselves cannot be the driver of unequal exchange. Instead, Amin argues that unequal exchange is the outcome of monopoly capital’s extension to the periphery in search of super-profits (through imperialism, as Lenin would put it). Amin understands labor power in terms of both the laws of accumulation and how class struggle subjectively plays out in specific contexts. Amin also insists that the rate of profit is higher in the periphery than in the centre (contrary to Emmanuel’s claim that the profit rates are equalized globally).[[9]](#footnote-9) Amin argues that by correcting some of the mistakes that Emmanuel made, his own model provides strong support for the existence of unequal exchange between the core and periphery.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Amin’s observation that the exports from the periphery show no significant difference in technique or productivity from the core, as three quarters of periphery exports to the core consist of relatively “developed” industries, changed the terms of the debate on unequal exchange. Up until then the debate had largely been between Bettelheim (1972) and Emmanuel (1972), where Bettelheim took the position that the periphery workers are just genuinely less productive than those in the core.

Nonetheless, many classical Marxists strongly oppose the idea that a worker can be “superexploited” (e.g. Leys, 1977; Shaikh, 1980). In the first volume of Capital, Marx also discusses the futility of comparisons between different degrees of exploitation in different nations and the methodological problems such a debate entails. In classical Marxist analysis, the exploitation happens when another class appropriates the socially produced goods at the time of production itself, and at no later stage. For Marx, class relations mean precisely the exchange of “unequal” (different) surplus value. By focusing on the unequal exchange, many Marxists argued that the nature of market relations was prioritized over the exploitation of labor (e.g. Bettelheim, 1972; Evans, 1975; Brenner, 1977).

Amin (1976) was among the first to try to measure unequal exchange empirically, which has later been done by many, including Gibson (1980), Williams (1985), Nakajima and Izumi (1995), Higginbottom (2014), and Ricci (2018). According to Milanovic’s (2012) empirical work, unskilled workers’ wages in rich and poor countries often differ by a factor of 10 to 1 (ibid: 125). Milanovic points out that while class may have been the most important determinant of inequality in the days of Marx, today more than 80% of global income difference is due to the large gaps in mean incomes between countries. This observation supports the emphasis on the nation state and geography which underlies studies of unequal exchange.

**From Uneven Development to “Delinking”**

*Uneven Development* was about interpreting the world. But in line with Marx’s famous phrase that “the point is to change it,” Samir Amin did not stop at interpretation. While *Uneven Development* provided a theoretical, historical and empirical analysis of the polarising tendencies of global capitalism, *Delinking: Towards a Polycentric World* (Amin, 1990a) provided a tangible and critical assessment of possible ways forward. Despite his fairly gloomy analysis of the polarising tendencies of global capitalism, Amin maintained an optimistic view on the possibilities for moving towards global socialism and communism.

Amin (2017) argued that there were specific conditions that allowed the West to prosper, and that they cannot be reproduced elsewhere. For example, the industries established in Western Europe in the 19th century were able to absorb a large proportion of rural populations, while large amounts emigrated to America. Meanwhile, in contemporary capitalism he observed that the demands that industries in the peripheries should be ‘competitive’ on world markets require technologies which reduce the level of labor intensive work, while there are no new Americas open for mass migrations from Latin America, Asia or Africa. Therefore, he concludes that the ‘pursuit of a model based on historical capitalism produces nothing other than “migration from devastated country sides to squalid urban slums” (ibid: 3). The solution that Amin identifies is that a new model of industrialization is required that is shaped by the renewal of non-capitalist forms of peasant agriculture, which would imply delinking from the imperatives of globalized capitalism.

The widely misunderstood term “delinking” is not synonymous with autarky, but rather the refusal to submit national-development strategy to the imperatives of globalisation. As Amin (1987: 436) puts it, delinking involves “the organization of a system of criteria for the rationality of economic choices based on a law of value, which has a national foundation and a popular content, independent of the criteria of economic rationality that emerges from the domination of the law of capitalist value that operates on a world scale.” Another way of putting it is that a country must try to compel the system to adjust to its needs, rather than simply going along with having to unilaterally adjust to the needs of the global system. This entails countries developing their own productive systems and prioritising the needs of the people rather than the demands of international capital. In line with this, Amin was very critical of the many attempts to build institutional structures in the periphery that were effectively imitations of the West (Amin, 2009b).

Delinking, according to Amin (1990a), required politically bold governments with the confidence to reject strategies based on static comparative advantage and foreign interests. He argued that this required both strong domestic support as well as South-South cooperation as an alternative to the exploitative economic relations between core and periphery. Substantial parts of his book on delinking were based on his study of China, which he saw as crucial for advancing a polycentric world (see also Amin, 1983).

For Amin, delinking also meant that the state (socialist or not) would need to invest not just in the goods that are the most immediately profitable on the world market or domestically, but in long-term projects that are the most likely to lead to improvements in living standards for people. Amin considered this aspect of delinking important for both capitalist and socialist societies, as he noted that there is no reason that a form of socialism that is just ‘capitalism without capitalists’ would prioritise long-term investments (Amin, 2011: 110), let alone pressing issues such as climate change.

While delinking in the form of developing national productive systems and prioritising the needs of the national population may seem sensible, there are a range of questions that must be raised in order to operationalise Amin’s concept. This is particularly relevant at a time when developing countries’ economies are so closely tied to global production and finance, which makes determining a separate law of value with a national foundation difficult, to say the least. Furthermore, while Amin (1987) neatly lays out how national surplus accumulated can be redistributed according to sectorial needs of growth, the political economy implications and challenges related to determining the distribution of surplus need to be more carefully interrogated.[[11]](#footnote-11)

**AMIN’S CRITIQUE OF EUROCENTRISM**

Amin critiqued mainstream Economics for being a discourse that legitimized the unrestricted predations of capital and dismissed claims that Economics was a pure science. But his critique went beyond Economics’ bias towards the needs of capital. He saw *eurocentrism* as a prejudice that distorted all social theories, as it disguised the true nature of the capitalist system, including its imperialist, racist foundations and ideological nature (Amin, 2009b). Amin’s work was at the time a part of cutting edge scholarship critiquing eurocentric depictions of world history and its byproducts in politics, policy, economics and development models - and it has since become a classic of radical thought.

Amin’s work is important for defining eurocentrism as an ideology and showing how the linear story of European capitalism being built on European characteristics of rationality and triumph of reason is flawed. In *Eurocentrism,* Amin points out that the fundamental basis on which European cultural unity was constructed is racist, as it created a false opposition between languages and a false historical narrative (Greece is considered “European” and not connected to the Orient, Christianity is European, etc). As such, his critique is also an early critique of “geographic racism,” in which the “lack” of development is explained through traits produced by the geographic milieu of poor countries (e.g. Sachs, 2003).

Furthermore, *Eurocentrism* was an important response to post-colonial literature which dismissed Marxist analyses almost *a priori* for being eurocentric. Amin demonstrated that he was in agreement with some of the post-colonial critiques of Marxism and made a strong case for how historical materialism could provide its own critique of eurocentrism within its own tradition. In line with his materialist outlook, his solution was to pursue a universal project free from European particularism, a “modernity critical of modernity,” as an alternative to eurocentrism (2009b:17).

Through *Eurocentrism*, Amin was also the first to present a critique of Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978)*.* He argued that Said’s critique appeared trans-historical and too general because he does not distinguish between the different European visions of the Islamic Orient - a critique that has since been repeated many times by others (Mamdani, 2018). Based on this critique, Amin warns of the danger of applying the concept of eurocentrism too freely, as it is a concept that was developed at a specific historical moment. Amin (2009b:176) also criticizes Said for only denouncing Eurocentric prejudice “without positively proposing another system of explanation for facts which must be accounted for,” which is what his own account of eurocentrism aspires to do. Generally, *Eurocentrism* has been taken as an important starting point for scholars who build further on Amin as well as critics (Mamdani, 2004; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2013).

However, because Amin argued that racism is a phenomenon derived from an economic base and that eurocentrism is therefore part of a broader ideology of economism where the economic determines the cultural*,* he has been critiqued for prioritising the economic aspects of historical development over the political and cultural. As Mazama (1995) points out, “if one is to follow Amin’s line of reasoning to its logical conclusion, Eurocentrism is not even European. Rather it is ‘capitalocentric’.”

Amin’s critique of culturalism extended beyond his critique of eurocentrism. He also saw political Islam as at best a cultural project that concealed the class character of society, which was therefore not a movement by the oppressed, but rather an identity that sought a piece of the capitalist pie. Amin’s rejection of political Islam was rooted in a firm belief that the Enlightenment was an important step forward and that religious ideologies, such as Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood, obscure the real nature of society (Dearden, 2018). He argued that these movements supported the idea that the world consists of conflicting cultural groups, which he believed helped the centre control the peripheries.[[12]](#footnote-12)

While Amin (2007) argues that political Islam is at the “service of imperialism,” that it is “lined up behind the dominant powers on the world scale,” (2007:3) and that it is a component of the counter-revolution in all Muslim countries, deliberately fostered by US imperialism (Amin, 2016:31), Amin-Khan (2009) points out that Amin does little to explain how this has come about, given that militant Islam is also confronting the US and its imperialist occupations. Furthermore, while political Islam may not be anticapitalist or against property relations, this does not mean it is an inevitable ally of imperialism.

**NUANCES AND CHANGES IN AMIN’S IDEAS**

Being the ‘creative Marxist’ that he was, Amin also adjusted his writings over time, as the world changed. For example, in Amin (2013) he recognizes how the world had changed since 1974, after which he argued that we had seen a long crisis of capitalism. With the fall of the Soviet Union, Amin shifted his analysis from class politics to “peoples of the periphery” as the collective agent for revolution (Ahmad, 2018:30). This is clear already in his essay “The Social Movements in the Periphery: An End to National Liberation?” (1990b), where he recognizes that the idea that the national bourgeoisies of newly independent countries would challenge imperialism might have been naive. However, despite his acceptance of the importance of social movements as mobilizing agents, he remained fairly attached to some variation of the Bandung project, which is what led to conflict and disappointment with the World Social Forum.

More recently, he turned his attention to the ecological destruction, which he deemed to be due to the expansion and contradictions of capitalism (Amin, 2009a), as well as the supposed rise of China and the BRICS. Amin traveled often to China, an economy that he considered to be neither fully capitalist nor fully socialist (Amin, 2013). Nevertheless, he saw many features of the Chinese model as exemplary for other peripheral economies, such as the merits of its socio-economic strategy when dealing with a large peasantry. However, despite Amin’s deep knowledge of China, his analysis has been criticized for glossing over important actors in China since Mao Zedong (e.g. Deng Xiaoping) and overestimating to what extent China’s productive system is truly “sovereign” (see Lane, 2014 on this point).

While a dichotomous core-periphery analysis pervades a lot of dependency analysis, including that of Amin, there were a lot of nuances behind Amin’s work and how he conceptualised the relevant actors in the world. For example, Amin (2010a) identifies six global classes of significance, namely 1) the imperialist bourgeoisie of the core, who take the largest piece of the global economic surplus, 2) the proletariat in the core, which earlier enjoyed real wage increases broadly in line with labour productivity, but which is now experiencing falling wage shares and increased precarity, 3) the dependent bourgeoisie of the periphery, which is largely in a dependent relationship with multinational capital, 4) the proletariat of the periphery, which is subject to super-exploitation, 5) the peasantries of the periphery, who are oppressed in dual manner by pre-capitalist and capitalist forms of production, and 6) the oppressive classes of the non-capitalist modes of production, such as oligarchs and warlords. With this framework in mind, it is clear that Amin did consider the struggles and alliances to be made to be complex and complicated. He recognized that even South-South alliances in the periphery would not necessarily be based on working class and peasant solidarity. Amin also made important contributions to the contradictions and challenges faced in specific regions, with a focus on Africa.[[13]](#footnote-13)

Moreover, as also recognized by others (Saul, 2018), it is remarkable how relevant many of Amin’s ideas still are despite the fact that more than half a century has passed since he first formulated their core. Discussions along the lines of delinking, uneven development and unequal exchange are frequent in *Development and Change* as well as other critical development journals, although the articles do not always refer to Amin’s ideas explicitly. Some examples of scholars that have picked up Amin’s ideas and adapted them in new ways are Valiani’s (2012) application of Amin’s unequal exchange framework to the global integration of labor markets for nurses, Taylor’s (2016) analysis of ‘diversified’ dependence in Africa, Higginbottom’s (2014) empirical investigation of “imperialist rent”, Bond (2006) and Wengraf (2018) on the economics of exploitation in Africa, and Ajl (2018) on how Amin’s concept of delinking can be applied to evaluate food sovereignty frameworks across Southwest Asia and North Africa.

**DID AMIN ACHIEVE HIS GOALS?**

Did Amin achieve the goal he set himself at age six - to change society? While he may not have achieved a socialist revolution, what he has accomplished as a scholar and activist has certainly contributed both to important insights about underdevelopment and to a flourishing academic and activist community in Africa. He supported many colleagues, young scholars and activists through intellectual guidance, mentorship, building and sustaining institutions in the Third World and through his own activism in the World Social Forum and elsewhere. As Issa Shivji (2018) put it in his obituary: “[Samir Amin] has consciously done everything possible and seized every opportunity available to provide space, forum, and a training ground for young African scholars.”

He chose to celebrate his eightieth birthday with a group of friends and comrades on a boat trip on the Nile, where they had informal seminars on economic and political topics, in addition to the birthday celebrations. This reflects Amin’s spirit - intellectually committed both to the development of radical ideas and to building and meaningfully connecting with a community of scholars around him. True to form, he has now been buried at Père Lachaise Cemetery in Paris, alongside leading intellectuals and artists at the most visited cemetery in the world.

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1. I am grateful for feedback on this piece from Max Ajl, Jayati Ghosh, Kai Koddenbrock, Francisco Perez, Kevin Rösch, Maria Dyveke Styve, Ndongo Samba Sylla, and the editors of *Development and Change*. Any errors remain my own. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. While he wrote about this in many of his books, it was also a central feature of the last piece he wrote for *Monthly Review* (Amin, 2018b). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. This is also in line with Mamdani’s (2018) observation. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. For example, *Imperialism and Unequal Development* (1977), *The Future of Maoism* (1983), and *Delinking* (1990a) are in many ways further elaborations of *Unequal Development*, while *Global History* (2010b) and *The Liberal Virus* (2004) can be seen as extensions of *Eurocentrism*. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See Chen and Yoshihiko (2016) for more on the fascinating institutional history of CODESRIA. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. His position is laid out clearly in Amin (2008: 37). In it, he explains why he prefers “convergence” over “diversity” because the “principal threat,” as he saw it, was the naive belief that “it is possible to change the world without taking power”. Amin therefore argued that diversity should not be considered a good in itself, given that it prohibits judgement concerning any movement, arguably resulting in the depoliticization of social movements. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The Bamako Appeal is available online at <http://www.cacim.net/bareader/pages/The%20Bamako%20Appeal1.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. While Amin and the other authors of the Bamako Appeal made it clear that they did not pretend or intend to speak on behalf of the WSF (Waterman, 2007), Conway (2013:39) points out that the way both the Bamako Appeal and Porto Alegre Manifesto were named and presented suggest deliberate attempts to blur the boundaries between the statements and the forum in order to "appropriate whatever legitimacy, authority and representativity that association with the World Social Forum might confer". [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Rather than making this argument based on neoclassical assumptions of diminishing returns to capital, Amin argues that profit rates are higher because of super-exploitation. The point on higher profit rates in the periphery and its association with imperialism has also been put forward more recently by Smith (2016) and Pröbsting (2013). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Another critique comes from classical Marxists, such as Anwar Shaikh (1980). While Amin (1974) assumes an equalization of profits both across industries and within industries, but not across regions, Shaikh (1980) argues that in reality competition forces all producers to sell at the same price, meaning that producers having different efficiencies will have different unit costs but the same selling price, and therefore different rates of profit. So within an industry, individual profit rates will generally differ, while competition of capitals equalizes average profit rates across industries. Shaikh argues that had Amin not made this mistake, he would have been led to the opposite conclusion, namely that there is no necessary tendency for a net transfer of value from the periphery to the core. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. See Robinson (2011), where he unpacks Amin’s approach to delinking and argues that Amin to a large extent depoliticises a highly political discussion about production and distribution. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Amin also makes similar critiques of political Hinduism and Buddhism (Dearden 2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Even between submitting his thesis and publishing *Accumulation on a World Scale* in 1974, Amin published seven books on various countries and regions of Africa, including Mali, Guinea, Ghana, Ivory Coast, and the Maghreb. He later also published on West Africa (Amin, 1973), the Arab world (Amin, 1978, 2012) and China (Amin, 1983). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)