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Samir Amin's contribution to historical materialism

In the timely and fine tributes to Samir Amin in this journal (ROAPE 2018, 45:157), I find that more could have been made of Amin's contributions to historical materialism. These contributions were perhaps deceptively simple, presented in a straightforward matter-of-fact style without the adornments and critiques of alternative views (and without the references) so common in academia. They were, however, genuinely original theoretical innovations that represented a clear break with eurocentrism in historical materialism. It took a thinker of Amin's breadth and depth of learning, theoretical acumen and originality to give us the contours of a truly global historical materialism. These contributions from this self-described 'Afro-Asian observer' (Amin 2011b, 10) deserve inclusion in the appreciation of Amin's work, and some of them also deserve more attention than they have received.

Amin, Marxism and Historical Materialism

Amin shared the view, going back to Friedrich Engels, that Marx made two major scientific contributions, namely the economic theory of capitalism, and the much broader intellectual agenda first known as the 'materialist conception of history' and later as historical materialism. Amin contributed to both of these agendas, and reflected on the relations between them (Amin 1978).

The present paper focuses on Amin's contributions to the second of these agendas. On the first agenda it suffices to say that Amin's concern was to globalize Marx's theory of capitalism, an effort initiated with the 1970 book on 'accumulation on a world scale' (Amin 1970) and continued and developed in several later works, such as the 1978 book cited above.

Turning to the other intellectual agenda pioneered by Marx, Amin considered historical materialism to be an unfinished project, a research program, and a program that had the entirety of human history as its object (Amin 2010, 9–11, 2011b, 1–11). He was not alone in this, and to situate Amin's contribution in the broader context of this tradition, it is worth considering what another Marxist scholar, Perry Anderson, had to say about historical materialism.

Anderson wrote that ‘there is only contender as a general account of human development across the centuries from primitive societies to present forms of civilization. That is historical materialism.’ He further argued that ‘Marxism alone has produced at once a sufficiently general and sufficiently differential set of analytic instruments to be able to integrate successive epochs of historical evolution, and their characteristic socio-economic structures, into an intelligible narrative’ (Anderson 1983, 86).

Amin shared the ambition signaled here, covering the whole of human history, and he built on and utilized the ‘analytical instruments’ first introduced by Marx: the concepts of relations and forces of production, modes of production and social formations, the analytical distinctions between economic base and political and ideological superstructures. He also shared the ambition to ‘integrate successive epochs of historical evolution, and their characteristic socio-economic structures, into an intelligible narrative’. But he rejected the early versions of this narrative, a version that is often seen as identical with Marxism.

This version posited a general movement from primitive communism through slave society and feudalism to capitalism, and then to socialism. The schema goes back to early works of Marx and Engels although both were much more nuanced in some of their writings (see Hobsbawm 2011, first published 1964). But the theory became canonized and dogmatized in communist parties and has been echoed in many texts in historical materialism, for instance by Althusser (Althusser 2014, 19) and Poulantzas (Poulantzas 1978, 22). It has also been subject to much critique, pointing to its shortcomings in theorizing non-European pre-capitalist societies and its inherent Eurocentrism, and efforts have been made among Marxist to remedy this through elaborations on Marx’s notion of ‘the Asiatic mode of production’ (see Hobsbawm 2011; Wickham 1984). Thus Amin is not alone in rejecting the dogmatized version of stage theory, but it seems that he is alone in having developed an equally parsimonious and convincing alternative.

The stage theory and the tributary mode of production

There are several elements in Amin’s alternative. He relabelled the first stage the ‘communitarian’ stage; he introduced a new concept, *the tributary mode of production* along with social formations dominated by this mode, for the next stage; he integrated *long-distance trade* as a constitutive element in the theoretical model; and he used these elements to provide an overview of human history that, to use Anderson’s words, integrated ‘successive epochs of historical evolution, and their characteristic socio-economic structures, into an intelligible narrative.’ This narrative that was as

parsimonious as the original Marxist schemata, but more convincing and open to further development as a research program.

Of these elements, the concept of the tributary mode of production is arguably the most important one and the one that has had the largest impact. The defining feature of the tributary mode is that a centralized political structure extracts economic surplus from an agrarian area. Historically this mode of production also has existed in multiple forms, and Amin sketches several sub-types of the tributary mode and subfamilies of tributary formations, in many ways widely different but sharing this defining characteristic.

The 'family of tributary formations' includes the ancient civilizations in the Middle East, South Asia, China and pre-Columbian America, and, Amin points out, in a long term perspective these have been the most successful in human history in terms of duration – having lasted in some cases for millennia. European feudalism, in this perspective, is a special case of the tributary formation, indeed a marginal one developed in the periphery of the highly successful Middle Eastern and Asian cases. In the same manner the slave-owning formations of Greek and Roman antiquity were special cases, 'situated on the borders of the tributary formations' (Amin 1976, 16).

The relevance and potential of this conceptual innovation was registered early, especially by Marxist historians. Chris Wickham, referring inter alia to the Marxist debate about 'the concept of the Asiatic mode of production', a concept he found 'totally unhelpful', wrote that 'Samir Amin has recently reformulated this mode as a "tributary mode", an idea which has a considerable array of possibilities; not least that it is possible to regard the mode as having a number of subtypes, one of which would be the ancient mode' (Wickham 1984, 35–36). In a later work Wickham used Amin's concept in a comparative examination of pre-modern social formations in China and the Middle East (Wickham 1985, 183–87).

Another British historian, John Haldon, made the tributary mode of production the central concept in a book-length comparative study of states in pre-capitalist societies. He found that the concept 'better represents the intentions of Marx original analysis of 'feudal' productions relations' and that it was useful 'because it moves away from the nineteenth-century vocabulary which Marx was necessarily constrained to employ' (Haldon 1993, 10). The anthropologist Eric Wolf pointed to 'a family resemblance' between pre-capitalist societies, captured by the concept of the 'tributary mode of production used by Samir Amin' noting also that the concept is 'foreshadowed by Marx' (Wolf Eric Robert 1997, 81). Another example of a scholar that found Amin's contribution useful is Kees van der Pijl who referred to Amin's concept of the tributary mode of production and used Wolf's

definition of 'empires' as 'cultural interaction zones pivoted on a hegemonic tributary society central to each zone' and (Pijl 2007, 63, 78).

There has also been reservations. Eric Hobsbawm, commenting on Wolf, wrote approvingly that 'There is much to be said for this broad classification, borrowed from Samir Amin,' but he went on to say that 'its drawback is that the 'tributary' mode clearly includes societies at widely differing stages of productive capacity' (Hobsbawm 1997, 166). A similar critique was voiced later by Alex Callinicos. He noted on one hand that Amin 'seems to have been mainly responsible for giving the concept of what he calls "the tribute-paying mode of production" wide currency on the left,' - a somewhat odd turn of phrase, as if Amin merely popularized a pre-existing concept, for which Callinicos however gives no other source. On the other hand he remained 'unpersuaded by the idea that most pre-capitalist class societies were dominated by a single, undifferentiated mode of production' (Callinicos 2009, 116-117 and note 33 p. 250).

Hobsbawm, however, did not engage directly with Amin's work and apparently missed Wickham's observation that one of the advantages of the concept precisely is that 'it is possible to regard the mode as having a number of subtypes.' He also missed Amin's own suggestions for differentiations within the category. The same counterarguments apply to Callinicos.

In sum, the Amin's concept of the tributary mode of production has been and remains a productive contribution to theory-building in historical materialism; it showed a viable route out of what Callinicos called 'the mess that is Marx's discredited idea of the Asiatic mode of production' (ibid p.251). The other elements in Amin's theoretical contribution, however, have not received the same recognition and appreciation and to these contributions I now turn.

Amin's analytic and the macro-historical perspective

One of these elements, to repeat, was to relabel the first stage the communitarian mode of production, described as a 'family' of different social formations that shared the feature of being without differentiated political and ideational institutions. More importantly, Amin brought *long-distance trade* between social formations into the theoretical framework as an explicitly constitutive factor (Amin 1976, 16 onwards). Finally Amin called attention to *petty commodity production* as a distinct mode that is much older than capitalism and has existed in the interstices of other modes but never been dominant in a social formation.

This reformulation of historical materialism's analytic enabled Amin, among other things, to give a theoretical account of social formations that at first glance would be difficult to fit into a stage

theory. One example is *the trading town* – a town whose rulers' wealth is derived not from the extraction of surplus from the town itself or the surrounding countryside but from its position in long distance trade between tributary formations. Many advanced cities in the Islamic world had this character (Amin 1976, 38–48). Another example, also drawn from the Islamic world, is the *tribal nomadic societies* that thrived on their control of long distance trade routes, based on their knowledge of the deserts and their mastering of camel breeding technology.

Allow me a Nordic-centric digression. It seems to me that Amin's analytic also can shed light on the Viking social formation in Scandinavia. Wasn't this a tributary formation – although of a less developed variety - based on a patriarchal peasant society articulated with long distance trade, situated at the intersection of the major North-South and East-West trade routes of Northern Europe? A superior naval technology allowed them to control these trade routes where in particular the route through the Baltic and Russia connected the more advanced formations in the Middle East with Western Europe – being then a supplement and alternative to the major route through the Mediterranean. If this is the case, it is hardly a coincidence that the rise and decline of the Viking formation followed, with a time lag, the rise and decline of Islam as a powerful naval force in the Mediterranean.

To summarize, the importance of Amin is first that he insists that a theoretical account of human history must take a global view. Secondly, his proposed parsimonious synthesis, based on the concepts of communitarian, tributary, and capitalist social formations, with several forms within each, along with long-distance trade and petty commodity production, is more convincing than the traditional Marxist stage theory and also more open as a research program.

These concepts were also the theoretical foundation for his synthetic overview of world history, first presented in his 1973 book. Later this overview was amended and in certain ways revised, but the theoretical agenda and core concepts were retained. Today this part of Amin's contribution presents a bold and thought-provoking macro-historical perspective on the current global situation.

Before going into this, however, let me substantiate the claim that this part of Amin's work has been little appreciated. After Amin's 1976 book, where he first outlined this agenda, there has been a growing interest in developing a non-Eurocentric and world-systemic perspective on human history, also paying attention to the role of trade between pre-capitalist civilizations, in other words along the lines suggested by Amin.

Three prominent Marxist or Marx- inspired writers, Giovanni Arrighi, Andre Gunder Frank, Immanuel Wallerstein shared Amin's ambition of addressing the world system as a whole in a long historical

perspective, and Amin sometimes collaborated with them. But none of them shared his historical materialist perspective with its use of the concepts of mode of production and social formation. Arrighi simply did not refer to or use such concepts in his major work (Arrighi 1994). Wallerstein rejected them explicitly, saying at one point rather polemically of the concept of 'societies' that the 'Social science would, in my view make a great leap forward if it dispensed entirely with the term', and further, in a footnote, that to substitute the term social formation for society 'is just flimflam. It changes nothing' (Wallerstein 1984, 2). Frank was on the same line, being critical of 'the so-called "tributary mode of production" and rejecting Amin's theoretical approach because 'far more important is participation in a single world economy, which is only obscured by this undue or even misplaced emphasis on "modes of production" (Frank 1998, 30).

Abu-Lughod's influential *Before European Hegemony. The World System A.D. 1250-1350* was, with its emphasis of trade and other interconnections between Asian, African, and European societies much in tune with Amin (Abu-Lughod 1989). This work had no mention of Amin. The same goes for Robert Cox's influential study, where Amin could have been relevant in the discussion of social relations of production and simple reproduction (Cox 1987, chapters 1-2 pp. 32-50). William McNeill, author of the influential *The Rise of the West. A History of the Human Community* (1963) wrote in 1991 a 'Retrospective Essay', where he self-criticized the book for its inherent US-centrism without mentioning Amin, whose contributions would have been relevant for his discussion. The same applies to John Hobson's otherwise fine and relevant study of *The Eastern Origins of Western Civilization* and one can argue that if Hobson had been acquainted with Amin's work, he might have reconsidered his conclusion that 'Marxism [...] as an overall framework [...] remains firmly within an Orientalist discourse' (Hobson 2004, 14). In a later study Hobson had a few mentions of Amin, but no engagement with nor reference to his major works (Hobson 2012). As already mentioned, Alex Callinicos (2009) did discuss the concept of the tributary mode of production, but he did not engage with Amin's broader perspective on world history. Finally, in Anievas & Nisancioglu's *How the West Came to Rule*, there was no mention of Amin in the Introduction's discussion of e.g. eurocentrism and the 'problematic of sociohistorical difference' (Anievas and Nisancioglu 2015).

The rise and fall of civilizations

In the long essay on peripheral social formations, first published in 1973, Amin gave this synthetic summary of world history:

'Around two fully developed centers of the tribute-paying formation that appeared very early, namely, Egypt and China, and a third that arose later, namely, India,

peripheral constellations of various types took shape and entered into relations with each other along their fluctuating frontiers. Thus one may list the Mediterranean and European peripheries (Greece, Rome, feudal Europe, the Arab and Ottoman world), those of Black Africa, Japan etc. It was in one of these, Europe, that capitalism was born' (Amin 1976: 58).

Thirty-five years later, informed by the intervening advances in historiography, and in an entirely different global situation, he summarized the development as one of

.. successive waves that gradually invented modernity, moving from the East to the West, from China of the Sōng to the Arab-Persian Abbasside Caliphate, then to the Italian towns, before finding its European form that took shape during the 16th century in the London-Amsterdam-Paris triangle. This last form produced historical capitalism, which has imposed itself through its conquest of the world, annihilating the previous variants which could have been possible and were both similar and different from the one we know. This conquest of the world by European capitalism is at the origin of Eurocentric interpretations of global history... (Amin 2011b, 5).

Amin's view on this was also developed into a deeper analysis and critique of Eurocentrism (Amin 2011a).

As summarized above Amin's synthesis may sound commonplace to readers familiar with more recent works in macro-sociological history and critiques of Eurocentrism as those cited above. But in 1973 when Amin's book first was published in French, it was a radical departure. Furthermore, Amin took a more radical lesson from his synthetic overview than most other observers.

The centrality of the periphery

Based on his extensive readings in world history, Amin concluded that major transformations in human society, transitions to a higher state of civilization or superior way of organizing human life, always develop in the periphery of the older, hitherto successful social formations. This principle was announced briefly but succinctly in the 1973 introduction to *Unequal Development*: 'when a system is outgrown and superseded, this process takes place not, in the first place, starting from its centre, but from its periphery' (Amin 1976, 10). Thus the Greece and Rome of antiquity developed in the periphery of the older tributary formations of Egypt and Mesopotamia, feudalism developed in Rome's periphery, capitalism in the North-Western periphery of feudalism, and American capitalism in the English periphery.

Amin combines this general observation from world history with the conclusions from his economic studies of peripheral capitalism. Being a radical dependency theorist he argued that the dominance of extraverted capital accumulation has led to a permanent blocking of the path to self-centred development in the periphery. Therefore peripheral societies should break with the capitalist world economy and find their own path to development and this path, he argued, had to be socialist. In other words, the next great stage in human history, after capitalism, would originate in the periphery.

This was written in a time of Soviet supported 'non-capitalist development' projects in some peripheral countries and of experiments with African Socialism in others, of radical demands for a New International Economic Order by developing countries in the UN system, and of the heyday of the new left in the West. Later, after the opening up of China, the onset of neoliberalism, the demise of the Soviet Union, and the rise of the emerging economies which seriously questioned Amin's blocking thesis and his idea that self-centred accumulation is the only path to real development, Amin's outlook became more temperate. But he did maintain that peripheral societies are faced with a basic choice between 'catching up' and 'doing something different', and while circumstances for the time being necessitate an emphasis on catching up, long-term they should and would strive for 'something different,' which, in Amin's view would be socialism. Thus Amin has maintained the core underlying idea, namely that in the long term, the next major transformation of human society will originate in the periphery. In 2003 he explained it this way:

In the twentieth-century challenge to the basic driving forces of capitalism, the two tasks – 'catching up' and 'doing something else' – were combined in ways that varied from period to period and place to place. But we can say, without forcing things too much that the first task became so dominant that development was virtually synonymous with strategies of 'catching up' (and later overtaking, perhaps).

[...]

In future, then, more emphasis must be placed on 'doing something else', although this should not make us forget that some elements of 'catching up' remains a necessary part of the agenda. (Amin 2003, 136).

'Catching up', in other words, is necessary but insufficient because it is unable to overcome the basic contradictions of the system. This implied a critique of the rulers of peripheral societies, 'the established class powers', whose struggle against the dominant powers are limited to the aspiration 'to flourish in the form of national bourgeoisies forcing acceptance of their equal participation in

shaping the future of the world'. Based on his economic analysis he claimed that 'such a "patch-up" within the system is objectively impossible' and instead he pinned his hopes on 'the complex and alternative historical blocs centred, to diverse degrees, on the popular classes in the diversity of their expressions' (Amin 2010, 120–121). Based on this he concluded that 'Once again, the transformation of the world is being initiated in the periphery of the established system (Amin 2010, 128).

Thus Amin seems to suggest that 'doing something different' should be initiated now, from below, while also striving to catch up. On the other hand, he also seems to acknowledge that the prospects for the alternative he hopes for are not very optimistic. A real alternative would have to be some kind of 'planification', different from 'the bureaucratic management of a "state socialism"', and such a planification would 'rest on forms still to be invented and on the active participation by the popular classes' (Amin 2010, 129).

Recent popular left uprisings notwithstanding, such an alternative seems to be close to utopian in the foreseeable future. But Amin's perspective still has relevance if we accept that 'doing something different' not necessarily means moving to socialist 'planification', but can also mean introducing agendas that differ from those promoted by the Western great powers. In the current global conjuncture, the centre is marked by internal strife (Trump, Brexit, populist nationalism) and political decay (Fukuyama 2014) and a major peripheral society, China, has offered to help fill any global leadership vacuum this may lead to (Acharya 2017). In this situation Amin's notion of the centrality of the periphery, combining 'catching up' and 'doing something different', is certainly worth keeping in mind.

On Amin's limited impact

Finally we can ask why some of Amin's original contributions to historical materialism has had relatively little impact on critical and Marxist scholarship. One plausible reason is Amin's own modesty of presentation. His first major contribution was unpretentiously titled an *essay* on the social formations of peripheral capitalism and the core ideas and concepts were presented briefly and as suggestions, without making much of how radical a departure from traditional European historical materialism they represented.

Another possible reason is that his economic and political contributions made him easily categorized as a 'radical dependency theorist', i.e. as someone whose original contributions required no further consideration. To this must be added that the general decline of interest in historical materialism in

much of the academia, especially in the West since the heyday of the 1960s and 1970s. Still, over the last decades, there has been a growing interest in Marxism, also in Western universities and yet Amin is far from a household name. One reason could be that the distinction between modes of production and social formations, central to Amin's contributions, is not universally accepted in Western Marxism as we saw in the cases of Frank and Wallerstein. Finally, we must take serious that a plausible reason is the preference, also among radical academics, for using and citing Western scholars and scholars who publish in the dominant (Western) academic journals. This situation ought to be corrected. All of Amin's contributions deserve credit and appreciation.

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