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INTERVIEW RFI

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Africa's failing and the global system

RFI: Would you say that you're among the pessimists who regard the five decades of African independence as five lost decades?

SAMIR AMIN: I'm not a pessimist and I don't think that these have been five lost decades. I remain extremely critical, extremely severe with respect to African states, governments and the political class, but I'm even more critical about the global system, which is responsible, to a great degree, for Africa's failings. You know that colonisation which we brag about today has been a historic catastrophe. At the time of the end of its colonisation, there were nine Congolese educated to university level in the Belgian Congo. After 30 years of Mobutu's regime - one of the vilest regimes ever - this figure grew to hundreds of thousands. In other words, the worst African regime was 3,000, 5,000 times better than the wonderful Belgian colonisation. It's important to remember these things.

RFI: When you point the finger at a global system in large part responsible for Africa's position today, what specific criticism are you directing at this system?

SAMIR AMIN: At the time of Africa's independence, Africa was, and remains today, the 'soft belly' - the most vulnerable part of the global system. And a vulnerable part of the global system is condemned by the logic of this system to be exploited. The overexploitation in Africa is primarily in the grabbing of the continent's natural resources. In other words, Africa is useful for the global system in the sense that it is a source of fabulous natural resources. A useful Africa is an Africa without Africans. For the global system, the African people are too much. They're not part of these fringe workers, save immigrants, who are themselves exploited. What's interesting for imperialism - to call it by its contemporary name - are the natural resources of Africa. And why is Africa vulnerable? Because after having gained their independence, African countries have not been sufficiently engaged - at all - in a path of rapid industrialisation. I say the opposite to what is generally said: 'Industrialisation? It's for later on. Africa is not ready for industrialisation.'

This used to be said about China 50 years ago. This used to be said about South Korea. These are exactly the countries who industrialised, who industrialised in a purposeful way, who today represent the world's emerging countries. Africa is 50 years behind. Within this 50-year delay, there's an important responsibility among the political class. But the weakness of this class of leaders - the fact that they have accepted the status of client for the West - does not diminish the responsibility of the Western countries.

RFI: Is there not a risk in this of putting these countries in the position of victims? Today's leaders in Africa are political players.

SAMIR AMIN: Of course they're political players! These are the subaltern allies within the global system, so they have as much responsibility as their patrons. But their patron has as much responsibility as them. Let's take a simple question, that of corruption, because everybody talks about corruption and it's true that a good number of African politicians are corrupted to the extreme. But those who corrupt them are not less responsible.

RFI: Let's look back at history. 1960 was the year of independence for a number of African countries. Others got their independence earlier, but 1960 was an important year for many francophone African countries and certain anglophone ones. Where were you during that period?

SAMIR AMIN: I was in Africa. I'd been in Egypt, in my country, between 1957 and 1960. In September 1960, I went to Bamako. I think it was even the day on which independence was proclaimed, or the day after. So from the beginning, I'd made the choice of wanting to put my modest abilities at the service of the development of the new Africa, the independent Africa.

RFI: How did you find that independence day?

SAMIR AMIN: I experienced it with a lot of passion and hope. Having regained their independence, these countries were finally going to be able to engage in a development worthy of the name - that is to say quickly, in a strong yet just manner - for everybody's benefit, for the benefit of the popular classes.

I hadn't chosen to go to Mali randomly. It was because the Malian government - the part which was calling itself the Sudanese Union at the time - had made radical choices, that is to say a choice based on independence, a choice of independence that was not based on rhetoric but which was real, by battling on the ground to gain the largest possible room for manoeuvre and making the history of this party widely one of listening to the popular classes, notably the peasantry. Many conditions were in place for an auspicious start. And this start wasn't bad, but the country remained extremely vulnerable, not only for geographic reasons - a very big country with a small population at the time (there were scarcely 4 million people), with enormous and uncontrollable borders, without access to the sea, and therefore with all sorts of reasons to be vulnerable.

The drift came soon after, something for which the local political leaders had a particular responsibility because they had created a margin for manoeuvre which they hadn't used in the best way. The drift towards power - I would not say personal, but the power of an elite and a minority, including personal power - proved very quick.

RFI: There are other countries that made a choice: Guinea and Ghana advocated for economic independence, notably in relation to their former colonisers. In observing these countries at the time, did you perceive all the problems which would develop in the 1970s and 1980s?

SAMIR AMIN: Yes and no. I would not have the audacity to say that I had predicted everything, but I saw fairly quickly the difficulties and the possible consequences and what happened with Mali, and also with Ghana. I was in Ghana and Ghana always gave me a good impression. In other words, despite the difficulties, it had a capacity to recover, something which proved the case, albeit with highs and lows of course. Guinea gave me a deplorable impression from the start - that is to say the impression of an extremely authoritarian government, especially president Sékou Touré, who was a good politician in the sense of knowing how to manoeuvre. He sometimes knew how to make concessions where necessary or things of this nature; he could sometimes negotiate internationally, but he had no political culture, no vision of the real difficulties and demands of development.

The bare minimum of development demands, has demanded and will always demand a certain type of democracy - not in the sense of a blueprint (or of a fixed recipe comprising multipartyism and elections which most of the time prove worthless) - not only within conditions in Africa, but elsewhere too, including in Europe, because you can vote how you like in Europe and the result is as if you haven't voted at all, and also in the sense of taking the social dimension into consideration. In other words, it demands a democracy associated with social progress - and not disassociated from social progress - and not associated a fortiori with social regression, as is the case at the current time when there are few elements of democracy.

RFI: Do you consider the political failings of these countries as a failure of the ideas that you've defended or of the application of these ideas?

SAMIR AMIN: An argument based on 'these were good ideas but their implementation was poor' is not my line of reasoning. If the implementation was poor, then the ideas themselves weren't perfect. I wouldn't say that they were poor. It could be said that the principles adopted by a certain number of African countries on the dawn of their independence were good, but that's not enough. You've got to go further than that. These ideas need to be translated into sub-ideas - I would say into action points - and then we've seen contradictions quickly appear.

RFI: Does Africa have a place in globalisation ... which you've criticised, or else?

SAMIR AMIN: Africa must find its place. If it must, it will. But this is a bit theoretical. In the short term, Africa remains extremely vulnerable. And as I was saying, in the coming future, Africa remains for the whole world - especially the developed capitalist powers - a source of primary materials, whether this be hydrocarbons, uranium, rare minerals, rare metals (very important for the future), the opening of agricultural land under the expansion of Western, Chinese, Brazilian and others' agribusiness, the sun (with electricity being transferred long distances) or water. International capital is purely concerned with these opportunities. For international capital, Africa, Africans, don't exist. The African continent is a geographic continent full of resources. And this is against the idea that Africa should organise, not only to refuse to submit to this looting, but in order to use these natural resources for its own development.

RFI: Following independence, various state leaders tried to put into place approaches to development said to be auto-centred or more independent than the former colonisers: Julius Nyerere in Tanzania, Kwame Nkrumah in Ghana... These approaches didn't achieve their goals. Today there is a period of complete globalised capitalism. What is there to do?

SAMIR AMIN: These means and these leaders didn't achieve their goals, it's true. But nor did the others. At the time there was a lot of boasting about Houphouët-Boigny's choice to open up Côte d'Ivoire as an unregulated, uncontrolled country. And where's Côte d'Ivoire today? I think its situation is even worse than Ghana's. This is to say that, despite everything - the heritage, the positive bits of what Nkrumah did - it's because of this that Ghana is in a better situation today than a neighbouring country while being comparable with Côte d'Ivoire in assets, agricultural type, natural resources and by size.

RFI: Today, what room for manoeuvre do African states have to find a middle ground?

SAMIR AMIN: This room for manoeuvre is experiencing a rebirth precisely because of the success of the 'emerging' countries: China, India, Brazil and other less important ones like South Korea, and, even within Africa, South Africa (the only one on the continent). These countries are already in conflict with Western countries. This was seen during Obama's visit to Beijing and subsequent visits. And this conflict, which isn't simply about access to natural resources but also access to markets and to finance, is going to intensify. Equally, this conflict constitutes a guarantee that the growth of the project of military control of the planet by the United States, which is bad at the moment, won't continue. Even if there are differences, these emerging countries will understand that they have an interest in contributing to this renaissance, to the reconstitution (there isn't a reconstitution in history), of something like a Bandung - in other words, I wouldn't go as far as saying a common front, but a broad alliance, even with the most vulnerable countries of the African continent, by means of collectively reinforcing and putting Western ambitions and the looting of the continent on the decline.

RFI: Many African countries are turning to China and India, sometimes as if they were a lifeline for overcoming their problems. Isn't this a mistake? Won't the solution instead be to know how to play with different partners?

SAMIR AMIN: Playing with different partners is a dangerous game. At the time of Bandung, many countries - including Nasser's Egypt - wanted to play on the conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union, playing the Soviet card at times, and the American at others. They lost on both counts. I think that today, a country which engages - let's say an active diplomacy - which plays a Chinese card one day and an American one the next, would fail in the same way. Conversely, I think that it's necessary to work towards rebuilding this group of 77 (the 77 are much greater in number today and the group of 77 is called the '77 plus China' within the United Nations). The Chinese offer to many African countries what the West does not: the construction of a huge infrastructure, which is one of the conditions of possible development, of an industrial development, of a development worthy of the name, which isn't simply a few agricultural products for export under miserable conditions, but rather transport infrastructure, railways, roads. After all, following independence the only example of the construction of a large railway in the history of modern Africa has been Tanzam, which was carried out by the Chinese. Now, alas it isn't possible that in the race for natural resources, the Chinese, the Brazilians and others would behave especially different,

differently from the Western countries.

RFI: Doesn't Africa risk falling into the same situation but with different partners?

SAMIR AMIN: No, I don't think so, because the partners are different. The Chinese and the Brazilians are not in the same situation as the United States or Europe. Firstly, they don't have a project of military control of the planet like the United States. If the United States has a project of military control of the planet, Europe, alas, follows. Europe - with its involvement in NATO - is simply a subaltern ally of the United States. No matter one's opinion on the nature of their political classes and their choices around economic and social development, neither China, India or Brazil is in the same situation.

RFI: Many observers speak of a period in history for Africa as a kind of second independence, especially for French-speaking Africa. What do you think about this?

SAMIR AMIN: These are great words. We're in a second wave. It could be better or it could be worse than the first - history is always open. Despite the title of René Dumont's book, 'L'Afrique noire est mal partie', Africa didn't start too badly. It started off badly in certain respects, with certain plans, and René Dumont was right on this point, on agriculture. But Africa, which didn't get off to too bad a start in 1960, quickly got stuck, and I hope that what it is being proposed does become a second wave of independence - if we're going to call it that - for the African continent.

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