



## ***The first Babu Memorial Lecture on 22 September 1997***

**Samir Amin**

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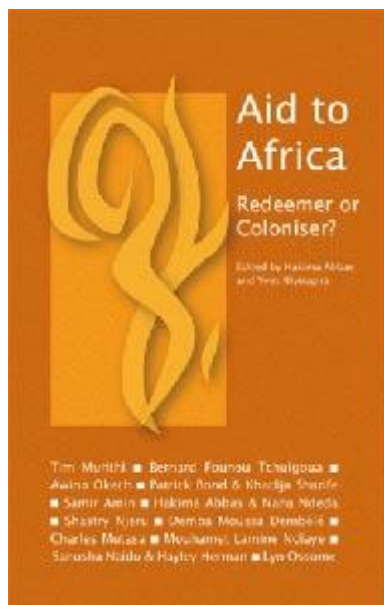


[cc Wikimedia](#) This week's Pambazuka News brings you a lecture given by Samir Amin on the 22 September 1997 in memory of Abdulrahman Mohamed Babu. Amin recounts the struggles of independence and post-independence in Africa, struggles that Babu played a major role in. In this eye-opening historical analysis, Amin not only pays tribute to Babu but encourages us to look beyond the populism of the Bandung years and the following comprador societies and instead build on the independence struggles to create genuinely democratic societies in Africa.

Thank you dear friends, sisters and brothers, it is with much emotion that I respond to the honour of being invited to speak at this first Babu Memorial Lecture. For me, speaking about Babu is speaking, not only of a comrade and an elder but of a personal friend whom I knew right from the post-war period – the whole of our generation in Africa. Babu (Abdulrahman Mohamed Babu) was someone with whom I shared most political views for something like 40 years. For me Babu's main characteristic was that he was always critical to systems and his criticisms were always from the left. He never shifted to the right and he was always critical even of regimes which he considered, and I think rightly, represented a step ahead in the long liberation struggle.

I think the political life of Babu can be divided into three periods – firstly, before 1955, before Bandung – the glorious project for the liberation of Africa and Asia crystallized as the non-aligned movement – then the Bandung years – then the period of recolonisation of Africa.

It was in London, in 1952, that we first met. Babu was then, like me, a young student, he was my elder by a few years which at that point of time seemed a considerable difference – later of course the difference lost most of its meaning.



Samir Amin is a contributing author for Pambazuka Press's new book, **Aid to Africa: Redeemer or Coloniser?**

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We were both very active among African students in Britain and France trying to start a unified movement, or unifying various movements, of students from various African and Asian countries. Babu was connected to the East African anti-colonialist committee, but there was also the West African Student's Union (WASU) which was very active, particularly the Ghanaians. They were thinking of establishing a magazine, and it was Babu and some others, in 1954, as far as I remember, who started the first African magazine in London. I was involved on the other side of the channel with a union called Etudiants Anticolonialistes (Anticolonial Students' Union) which brought together students from Asia (Vietnam), the Middle East, and Africa. We also had a newspaper, and in working together we discovered that we had the same views. These views could be summed up in the questions – who is going to lead the struggle for national liberation and to do what? Is it purely and simply national liberation to get independence and be part of the capitalist system? National liberation cannot have any meaning if it is not led by a communist party, by Marxism and socialist forces associated with it.

We were among the first readers of Mao Tse Tung's New Democratic Revolution, which was published, in French and English in 1950 or 1952. There were clearly two lines: There was the Indian line presented by (Jawaharlal) Nehru and the Congress Party (which was similar to and came from the same tradition as the Egyptian position) – national liberation or the struggle for independence with a view to participating on a more equal footing in the same global capitalist system; and there was the Chinese line which was followed by the Vietnamese and other countries of South East Asia. There was of course a sharp difference between the two lines. Most of the organisations we belonged to – particularly the Africans and the people from the Middle East – were rather of the Nehru line. We were a minority but we had a strong impact and Babu played a major role in that. Our position was that national liberation cannot be separated from socialism because no other social forces than those with an objective interest in going beyond capitalism into socialism could achieve national liberation. Perhaps we were exaggerating (as history has proven) because the role of the bourgeoisie had not completely ended, but I think looking back after 40 years that we were not fundamentally wrong. I had the opportunity of discussing this with Babu comparatively recently and we agreed that view was not wrong, even if history was a little different.

In the second period – the Bandung period, called after the conference in Bandung, Indonesia

in 1955, at which Nehru, Sukarno, (Gamal Abdel) Nasser and Zhou Enlai met and established an enormous societal project for the liberation of Asia and Africa.

The African liberation project, particularly the tendency represented by Kwame Nkrumah, was also a major force in that conference, along with many other organisations and forces – I'll come to Zanzibar in a moment.

The point was as follows: National liberation under the leadership of the Communist Party had achieved its goals in China in 1949, was achieving its goals with a compromise (division of the country) in Vietnam in 1954, but elsewhere the communist guerrillas had been defeated – in Thailand, earlier in Indonesia, and in Malaysia. The bourgeois line of India, Egypt and a number of other countries of Asia and the Middle East had achieved national independence but curiously, instead of being supported by the imperialist system had found themselves in conflict with it on major issues such as the Cold War or with respect to internal problems related to multinational companies' property, mining, trade etc. And the bourgeoisie, contrary to what we had thought before, was able to achieve something, at least with respect to national liberation, and could be anti-imperialist. Babu and I (and many others like ourselves) thought that the Bandung line should be supported and that we should reflect on our previous analysis, not that it was wrong but that perhaps the objective conditions had changed and that there was a bourgeois national societal project, a nationalist project, with (different) shades of course, which could be qualified differently from one country to another. There was gradually a radical line which developed which Babu and I came to qualify later as nationalist populist (populist not socialist). It represents not only the bourgeoisie but it operates in alliance or with the support of popular classes. But where does it lead? Where can it lead?

At that point (the 1960s) there came the independence of a number of African countries south of the Sahara and the radicalisation of the struggle in North Africa, in Algeria in 1954 with the war which was to end in 1962. As a result, independent Africa was divided into two camps – the Monrovia group which appeared to us to follow a neocolonial line, and the Casablanca group which was very small (neither Tanganyika nor Zanzibar belonged to it at that point). The contradictions between the two groups were suddenly reduced at the end of the war in Congo and they merged into the Organisation of African Unity in 1963. Since that moment there have been two approaches on the left to the question of national populism, those who believed that not only should it be supported but that it would lead to national liberation and even to social transformation, and those who were critical. The first group supported the idea that the contradictions between national liberation and imperialism can lead to socialism. There was a whole ideology and political analysis which was produced as a non-capitalist road to socialism. Again there was a minority among the left – and not a small one – in Africa, in the Middle East, and in Asia which did not look at that nationalist populist experience in that way but regarded it as so full of contradictions and historical limitations that it would not be able to go very far; that the contradictions would radicalise the popular classes and would lead to new revolutions among African and Asian people; or if the power system is able to maintain itself and strengthen its position, it is going to reintegrate itself further into the global system, (reintegrate further because of course it had never de-linked) and keep well away from the idea, the possibility, the potential for de-linking with more radical internal changes into socialism.

That was a debate which started very early, almost immediately after Bandung in 1955. It was reflected in the Chinese-Soviet debate which started two years later. Among other things there was the question of the so-called non-capitalist road, or was it a capitalist road with its own

specificities, its own contradictions with other capitalist roads and interests but belonging to the family of capitalist roads? When I met with Babu to discuss precisely these problems – what position should we have? What analysis should we think of? We found ourselves (with others) to be of the same type of view – critical, and critical from the left – that is, even if those contradictions create the conditions in which we can consider the regimes anti-imperialist and therefore support them in their struggle we should not forget that they are very strongly aware of the danger that is represented by an autonomous organisation of the popular classes. And this is what forms their approach vis-à-vis the trade union movement, vis-à-vis the Communist party, vis-à-vis independent social movements – trying to control the movement and limit its capacity to go beyond. The Soviet Union was supporting them and the Soviet Union was right from an overall perspective of a major struggle – East – West, the Cold War but also capitalism vs. socialism in general; but you need to qualify them as nationalist bourgeois, nationalist populist, nothing more, with all the internal contradictions implicit in this. I was at that point very critical of Nasserism and it created some problems for me for quite a long period. Babu did better than I because he was able, at that point to participate in the creation of objective forces in his country (Zanzibar) which led to a revolution in January 1964, which potentially at least could go beyond nationalist populism.

I knew of course what Babu thought of all this. We had been on the board of a magazine, *Revolution*, which was published in 1962-63 i.e. just before the Zanzibar revolution and at a crucial point in history at least from the Egyptian point of view, after the radicalisation of 1956 but before the defeat of 1967, a time of close Soviet-Egyptian relations. It was also the glorious time of Ghana with Nkrumah, of Guinea with Ahmed Sékou Touré, there was the victory of Algeria. In other words, there were a number of points on the map of Africa where there seemed a potential for radicalisation going beyond nationalist populism. We worked, both of us, with others on that magazine, to look at precisely this question. Is it possible and if so under what conditions for nationalist populism to move to the left? Not because the leaders move to the left by themselves, not because they develop a socialist rhetoric from time to time, not because the Soviets gave them a certificate of socialism, but provided the popular classes organised independently go into conflict with the system and go ahead. Babu tried to do this in Zanzibar with some success, Amrit wrote a book (*Amrit Wilson : US Foreign Policy and Revolution – The Creation of Tanzania*, Pluto Press, London, 1989) some time later which has established that the imperialists were afraid of that small country and thought that the best way to limit the danger was to merge Zanzibar with Tanganyika to form Tanzania. And if we look at what happened later as a result partly of that (partly of course it was for reasons internal to Tanzania and Zanzibar), we have societies which were not allowed to move much beyond national populism. Soon after the merger, in 1967, came the Arusha Declaration.

We see some countries of Africa moving from a very neocolonial pattern chosen by another set of countries into a more radical national populism with a socialist rhetoric and in some cases social transformations – whether as in North Africa and Egypt this took the form of land reform or in other countries nationalisation even where there was very little to nationalise, or attempting to modernise through industrialisation with a view to catching up – in conflict with the logic of the global capitalist system of that time. So there appeared to be a potential and most people were very happy with the Arusha Declaration and considered that by itself, it was almost a guarantee that Tanzania was moving towards socialism. Babu was critical, critical from the left. He said that there are a lot of conditions which are not provided by the very logic of that system, by the patterns of ruling the country which reduce the chances of its moving beyond nationalist populism – and he was right, history has proven that he was right.

And he was not alone, we were right, fortunately there were many of us, but we were still a minority. A minority moreover which had no very strong capacity to convince the popular classes through organisations of autonomous political forces.

In my opinion it was because he was critical that Babu was arrested, for no other reason. And he was critical again, he said it again after six years of prison from 1972 to 1978. In 1972 we had organised a big meeting together in Dar es Salaam – liberation movements of South Africa, Angola, Mozambique, Zimbabwe but also from independent Africa – North, West, Central and East Africa, whether from the radical nationalist populist regimes – parties speaking in their name, or from other political forces within those countries. We debated exactly this point – that accepting that we are on a capitalist road – under what conditions may we move from that road to another line. The meeting did not please everybody and he was regarded, while he was still a minister as a potential danger to the system.

Now things started moving faster than we ever imagined to the sad conclusion that we had more or less forecasted. In the mid 1970s, there was the so-called proposal of (Houari) Boumediène of a New International Economic Order after the oil shock of 1973, it was totally rejected by the West and it was the start of the erosion of nationalist populism. The rates of growth and industrialisation which were not so bad a relatively short time before moved towards growing difficulty and the power system was confronted with a challenge. To move beyond would require more power for the popular classes, and if this did not happen then the conditions would be created for an imperialist counter offensive – a successful imperialist offensive – and the dismantling of the broad alliances that were led, if not by a bourgeoisie, at least by a potential bourgeoisie (a ruling class) which would aspire to becoming a neo-comprador bourgeoisie and would shift to the right. It happened in Tanzania, in Egypt, in Ghana, everywhere in Africa at that point in time.

I could not meet Babu because he was in jail. But with other brothers, sisters, comrades, we started thinking of a new set of discussions – now that nationalist populism has gone to its limits, has started to erode, what else? How to analyse the next phase of the struggle? We established the Third World Forum in 1975, Babu was in prison but he was a member from the very start. And when he came out in 1978, he was very active in promoting the idea.

Then we entered into the third period of re-compradorisation of Africa. From the 1970s till now it has been continuously been going on along with the same erosion of the attempts to build socialism elsewhere. I have in mind the Soviet Union but also China. As I said earlier, in the debate of the early 1960s about the non-capitalist road – our criticism, from the South – of the Soviet Union probably started in 1957 and continued till the early 1960s. It was over the labelling of certain regimes as 'socialist' by the Soviets, purely for diplomatic and political reasons. We did not relate it at that point to a critique of the Soviet system itself, but that came very quickly when Maoism addressed this in a critique of the Soviet Union and Soviet socialism, analysing it not as a socialist road but a capitalist road – what I have described as a way of building capitalism without capitalists, with the same ruling class (which was a non-capitalist ruling class) becoming a capitalist class in the last chapter of that evolution.

When we think of the historical limitations of nationalist populism and Soviet socialism we realise that in the two cases where we have a vision of capitalism without capitalists, the target is to reproduce a society which is very close to the reality of a capitalist society with a view to 'catching up' or reducing the historical gap which is a result of imperialism and unequal development. Until it (this gap) is reduced to the point of the countries becoming

equal partners; and a qualitative change in the power structure and the economic system to having normal capitalism with capitalists. And if it is normal capitalism, we in Africa are bound to be more mediocre, because for historical reasons, the West and particularly Europe has maintained us in the old role of the periphery. We are still producing raw materials, agricultural and mineral, and not moving into industrialisation at the very time when parts of Asia, either through communist leadership or through bourgeois leadership (India and South East Asia), and with different historical reasons Latin America – are moving into industrialisation more or less successfully – in terms of the capacity to be competitive.

The re-compradorisation proposed for Africa is the road to marginalisation in the global system. I remember discussing this with Babu more than once. One occasion I remember was when we were invited by the Afro-Asian People's Solidarity Group in the 1980s for a series of meetings and discussions with a number of comrades.

This latest chapter in the history of Africa has come to such a disastrous point that it has led to the crystallization of such things as ethnicity, civil war, religious illusions etc. I did not have the opportunity to discuss this with Babu but it would have been useful to have his contribution to the analysis of what has been changing in Southern Africa in the last few years. There have been a series of important changes; I call them victories in the long liberation struggle. Firstly, in South Africa the end of Apartheid, which of course is the beginning of 50 years more of struggle to move from that society which is perhaps the ugliest in the world into something acceptable from a human or a socialist point of view. Changing that microcosm of a world system in which you have the maximum inequalities which you can find anywhere in the globe within the boundaries of the country, into something else. But the first victory and a major victory was the end of the political system of Apartheid. Now, in the meantime even before there have been changes and continuing struggles, there have been the first changes in the same direction in Zimbabwe, the continuation of armed struggle in Angola and Mozambique, the change in Uganda with (Idi) Amin and (Milton) Obote replaced by Museveni, and then last but not least the fall of Mobutu (Sese Seko) in Congo .

These changes are not the end and in my understanding they have not moved out of the pattern of compradorisation of Africa. But they have mobilised political forces which for sure have objective interests and a feeling that the system is not delivering what they expect. And for the first time in this current period we see those forces, whether organised or not, reappearing on the stage. We have to regret very strongly that someone of the calibre of Babu is not with us to contribute to those changes – not only analysing those changes but also defining an alternative strategy. Some of us, mainly academics, try to analyse those events and some speak of a renaissance of Africa and a new world. I think Babu would have analysed not only where we stand today but on what conditions national liberation can move ahead – re-compradorisation can be destroyed and replaced by a popular democratic alliance of forces. Babu had started during the multi-party elections in Tanzania to play that role. I think in addition to the friendship we all have for him, for his enormous personal qualities, we all regret deeply that he is not with us to continue the debate.

## QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

QUESTION: Given the current political and economic situation in Africa today, what do we have to do to move the situation forward?

SAMIR AMIN: I think all the questions are related, and the first one really sums it up: What strategy should we put forward from where we are. That is the most important and relevant issue. I do not have a blue print for that and shall not try to offer one but – assuming that the overall analysis of the global capitalist system at this point in time is correct – then what can we do?

Firstly, one must never resuscitate the past. Things have changed. It is not that the experiences before have failed, I do not think that failure or success is a correct way of analysing things, rather that it has provided changes and reached historical limitations and entered a new phase. The system is changing and the challenges are changing. One can never respond to new challenges by trying to reproduce the responses which had their efficacy in a previous period. If we look at what I think are the challenges, we ought to develop the struggle at all levels: national – meaning the boundaries of the state (a political reality); regional and sub-regional; the South – with all the internal limitations and contradictions; and at the global level.

At the national level I would stress fundamental principles which have always been true, even if it is under different conditions; the autonomy of organisation of the people, of popular classes, as far as is possible. That is the meaning of democracy. Democracy should not be reduced, as the West wants it to be to a formula with multi-party elections or pseudo-elections, not necessarily absolutely fabricated but without much meaning – and in some cases meaningless! Low intensity democracy and nothing more. Long live democracy provided it changes nothing! The market changes by itself so if you move this way or that way the result is the same if you are powerless. Therefore the question is how to re-link democratic demand to social progressive change. It is a very complex problem with cultural dimensions – how to democratise the society, not only the higher strata of political management of society. That is crucial, more than ever before, because at earlier stages, national populism could indeed achieve something – not now. In the struggle for independence and in achieving independence it created upward social mobility through education – which has been the way of creating non-democracies or pseudo- or caricature-democracies. Now we need to link democratic change to social progressive change. That is the challenge. There is no blueprint as I said; we have to take into consideration the concrete conditions which are different from one country to another and from one period to another.

QUESTION: My question is about the balkanisation of Africa, if we become petty nations, do these nations have the capacity to advance the cause of Africa?

SAMIR AMIN: But although we all have a responsibility, even the smallest and weakest countries, we have also to take into account that this has to be reinforced by action at a regional level. That is why the ideology of Pan-Africanism or Pan-Arabism, while not negative, are not enough by themselves. It is not useful to repeat general wishful thinking rhetoric of Pan-Africanism or Pan-Arabism. Here we have to look at the challenge of regionalism in another way: That the bourgeoisie – at the global level or the compradors at various levels in Africa and elsewhere – look at the problem of regionalisation in terms of common markets and we should be very critical of this view. It is presented as follows: That if even the Europeans with strong national economies need to unite by building a common market, we should do the same. In fact they have different problems and I think they have to go beyond a common market even from the European Left point of view. I think that the European problem will find its limitation very soon and dangerously. I think that what we had in the past, since the industrial revolution – classical imperialism – was a polarisation on a global level. This was more or less synonymous with industrialised countries (America, countries of western Europe, central Europe, Japan) and non-industrialised areas (the rest).

The vision of catching up was logically modernisation, and therefore regionalisation (whether de facto, with a large country – multinational like the Soviet Union – or with a number of countries medium and small like we have in Africa and South East Asia) would mean supporting further industrialisation through more integration and common markets with a certain degree of protection. I think now we are moving towards polarisation no longer based on industrialisation vs. non-industrialisation, but on the five monopolies of the centre: the monopoly of science and technology; the monopoly of controlling finance systems at the global level; the monopoly of access to (not ownership of) the resources of the globe; of communication, and through communications interfering in politics, culture etc; and the monopoly of armaments. In that framework a number of countries of East Asia, South East Asia, South Asia, Latin America – and in this way you get more than half the population of the globe – are moving and quite successfully into industrialisation and towards the capacity to be competitive in the global market. But they will face polarisation, they will continue to be a periphery to the advantage of the centres of the five monopolies. Therefore we should look to regionalisation as a means of fighting bourgeois policy and reducing its impact – this is nothing to do with a common market. In the political dimension of regional security the question of armaments is very important, the cultural dimension – the monopoly of communications is very important. But there are also other dimensions.

That is the pattern of regionalisation around which we should organise. Not that I have disrespect for the rhetoric of Pan-Africanism or Pan-Arabism but it is not enough by itself. It may turn into a pure rhetoric with little effect if it is not accompanied by a vision of the region very different from the dominant vision – which includes the vision of intellectuals on the left, nationalists, progressive people of Africa – people like ourselves.

We also need to fight on a global level (this is not an answer but a comment on the collapse of the Soviet Union). We have tasks and responsibilities and there are not only reactionary but also progressive forces everywhere, including at the centre, who also have their responsibilities. We have to be internationalist and look at how to link progressive struggles in the North and South. I don't think it is surprising that with the internationalisation of capital, people should respond with more local nationalism – whether it is national chauvinism, ethnicism, or culturalism of one sort or another. Therefore there is a struggle we have to develop at a global level; we have to take up the challenge to open serious and continuous debate between progressive forces of North and South. So, we should be active at these three levels and the alternatives will crystallize.

QUESTION: Are you pessimistic or optimistic about the future in Congo?

SAMIR AMIN: The last question was about being pessimistic or optimistic, I don't want to be either. But put the question another way, not whether (Joseph) Kabila is bad, but what conditions can bring a step ahead towards crystallisation of an alternative – i.e. the problem is the strengthening of democratic forces within the Congo. The future will depend not on who is Kabila but on how Congolese people organise, develop, and potentially impose democratisation and not the low intensity democracy which the West is asking. They are asking Kabila to organise elections which they never asked Mobutu to do. But it does not mean we do not need democracy in Congo. If we put the question in that way, we get out of the issue of whether the reality leads us to be pessimistic or not, we should ask ourselves what are the conditions and what is our responsibility in that.

QUESTION: Congratulations for capturing so succinctly what Babu stood for. A few years



ago when I spoke to him, he was very suspicious about what was going to happen in South Africa. There was a distinction between fighting to overthrowing a system and working towards an alternative. His feeling was that in South Africa we have not clearly demonstrated what the alternative would be. I would like to link that with another issue you have raised about an African 'renaissance'. For example in the Orange Free State, the grassroots people decided who should be the Prime Minister but the powers that be decided who actually became the Prime Minister. The question then is – how viable is this African 'renaissance' and what is your reading of South Africa?

SAMIR AMIN: Now, what has happened in South Africa? Contrary to the opinion currently developed, particularly in Britain, that Apartheid was conflicting with the logic of capitalism as though capitalism was synonymous with democracy and anti-racist at least in principle. No, capitalism is much more complex than that. Apartheid has been very useful for capital accumulation and so on but it has reached its limits because of the struggle of the African people of South Africa. The project of capital accumulation in South Africa, in the language of the World Bank has failed (in the sense that it has been unable to build a competitive export industry). It is as bad as the Soviet Union, as bad as Egypt etc. Of course the Apartheid regimes were not socialist, nor were they Blacks or Arabs. They were good whites, capitalists. They failed because the slave labour – almost slave labour – resisted. The result was a microcosm of the global system. You have everything that exists anywhere and usually the worst of everything! You have strata with the level of consumption of developed capitalist countries, but not the average productivity of those countries. Elsewhere there is an industrial third world, hardworking people with high productivity but low wages, and a fourth world too – the poorest people of Africa in the erstwhile Bantustans. All that is in one country. Now the target from any progressive, not even socialist but progressive, perspective should be reducing inequalities and within 50 years creating a normal capitalist society with classes. This means land reform, redistribution of the population – enormous changes. Between 1990 and 1992, I had feared that a pseudo-federal constitution would be adopted which would reinforce the capacity for unequal development. Fortunately the constitution is not too bad on that point, but the main problem now is overall strategy. What the World Bank is suggesting (and all governments of the West support this and the government of South Africa at present accepts it) is the vision of becoming competitive on the global market. It is suggesting capitalising on the so-called advantages of South Africa compared to other African countries, industrialisation etc. to become more competitive. This choice maintains the unacceptable inequalities. Even if there is a Black bourgeoisie and already there is one, it could be part of what could be called a 'semi-imperialist' role of South Africa within Africa. I think the other countries and peoples of Africa will not accept it and it will not go very far even from the point of view of that capitalist vision. The alternative would be to focus more in the short term, i.e. the next 50 years on dramatic internal social changes and to bring the question of external relations (what to export, what to import) to the service of changing the social pattern of society inside the country. What the World Bank has said is adjust your internal development for global constraints/forces, I am saying try as much as you can to adjust your external relations to internal perspectives. I am relatively optimistic; South Africa had proved that it will change in the long run.

Q. What can Africa do to deal with International Financial Institutions?

Samir Amin: International Financial Institutions should not be looked at as the major forces we are up against. They are just institutions at the service of dominant capital – the G7 if you like. Their vision of globalisation is in my opinion a utopian vision, the capitalist utopia – that

you can run the world not as a market but as a supermarket and very little more. It is a utopia, it is stupid but it is the natural utopia of capitalism. Capitalists adjust when they have an enemy who compels them to adjust. But when they feel they can run unilaterally, it can produce the maximum chaos in the shortest possible time. It does not solve the problem or even move the system out of the crisis but it moves into a spiral going down with relative stagnation, low growth, relative excess of capital which does not find a way of expansion and deepening of the productive system and for which financial outlets have to be created continuously. It is not that the technocrats of the IMF or World Bank have thought of the system, they do not think of anything, they just implement. That is why we must create social and political forces which compel the system to adjust.

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\* This lecture has been edited from the original transcript.