



Reply to Samir Amin

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Source: *Latin American Perspectives*, Vol. 6, No. 3, Studies on the State and Development and on Popular Mobilization (Summer, 1979), pp. 114-116

Published by: [Sage Publications, Inc.](#)

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Accessed: 18/06/2014 09:54

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This reply to Samir Amin is a response to Amin's critique of the Weeks and Dore article, "International Exchange and the Causes of Backwardness. Both the article and the critique appeared in *Latin American Perspectives*, Volume VI, Number 2 (Spring 1979).

REPLY TO SAMIR AMIN

by

John Weeks and Elizabeth Dore

Historically, theoretical debate has brought vitality to the revolutionary struggle, and at its best has represented the ideological reflection of the practical struggle for a correct revolutionary strategy. At its worst, it has involved a mere repetition of a set of views, untouched by the objections of the critics. Amin's reply would have to fall into the latter category. In our critical survey of the surplus extraction school, we sought to reveal the theoretical basis of that analysis and to demonstrate its invalidity. To do this, we employed certain concepts, which we consider to be based in reality, not merely the mind, and to show how these concepts reveal a consistent series of theoretical errors. Before our position could be accepted, one would have to decide (1) that we correctly identified the theoretical core of the surplus extraction thesis and did not divert the debate into side issues; (2) that the concepts we employed in fact are those based in the concrete, presented to us by reality, and not idealistic constructs; and (3) that we have correctly defined these concepts in relation to the concrete and not employed them in a purely formalistic way.

Our basic argument can be quickly summarized: it cannot be established that the value of labor power (valorized necessary labor time) varies across countries with the standard of living of the working class. This is a controversial conclusion and would be such even if it did not imply the rejection of the "unequal exchange" hypothesis. Amin has chosen not to comment upon any of our arguments, but rather to summarize his own position once again. Thus, it is difficult to carry the debate further on the basis of his reply. He does throw out a challenge, asserting that our analysis is limited to "Marx's exegesis," that we commit the sin of "dogmatic exposition," and as a consequence are "powerless to grasp the imperialist dimension of contemporary capitalism." Such errors are indeed grievous, but it is difficult to take up the challenge when we are left in the dark as to where in our analysis they occur.

The closest we can come to divining this is when Amin offers the rhetorical question, "What is the significance of the universalization of the productive process on a world scale . . . ?" This question would seem to elicit the reply that the values of the commodities consumed by the working class are

the same in every country, since they are international in character. Were this answer correct, we would be expected to concede the errors Amin attributes to us. However, to pose a question is not to answer it, and we have demonstrated why Amin's answer does not follow. Amin in his comment answers his own question, and in doing so allows us to demonstrate our point again.

Amin answers his question without explaining what is meant by "the universalization of the productive process on a world scale." The meaning of this phrase is not obvious, and it illustrates the problems which arise when one employs vague and imprecise terms. Each word in the phrase has a dictionary meaning, but their combination imparts very little. Amin accuses us of "erroneous interpretation" of his work; indeed, he may be correct, since his language is so vague as to be meaningless on its own. Consider the phrase "productive process." We must presume that he means the *capitalist* productive process, since the word "imperialism" also appears in the question. But its meaning still alludes one, since it is not specified if the universalization, which we take to mean "general adoption," is of the social relations of capital and free wage labor, or of that social relation in the context of a particular level of development of the productive forces. In other words, are we being questioned about the spread of wage labor or the adoption of particular techniques of production? The answer the author provides is at a level of vagueness in keeping with the question. "World markets" for capital and commodities are assumed ("if the . . . markets have become world markets . . ."), without a hint as to how this is brought about. The process by which commodities become "world commodities" is precisely the essence of the debate. Amin takes it as given. Then we were presented with the concept of the "value of labor power at world level," when the very existence of such a concept is the central issue in the debate. This concept, which we consider to be idealistic, in that it is purely a mental construction not existing in reality, is linked to "the world 'average' level of development of the productive forces."

Amin himself must have some reservations about this last concept, since he places *average* in inverted commas, and it would be interesting to know why. The concept presents us with a flood of questions: (1) does this "average" include capitalist and noncapitalist forms of production (paragraph eight of the reply would seem to suggest a positive answer by the author); (2) if so, how are these integrated in a manner which allows one to speak of an "average?" Further, we are told that the world value of labor power is *linked* to this "average" development. Now, if we accept that such a world value exists, that *necessarily implies* an "average" development of the productive forces, and it is not a question of them being "linked" — a vague term open to various interpretations — but that the latter *determines* the former. What is absent in Amin's statement is any *explanation* of the formation of the "average" development of the productive forces. We have argued that he in fact assumes an *equal* development of the productive forces, and that this is the interpretation one must have of his vaguely posed question in paragraph six of his reply. On this basis, we labelled his argument "neoclassical," which it is by implication.

Our discussion so far has not exhausted the proliferation of concepts clustered into paragraph six, since there we also find the term "accumulation balances." The argument seems to be that the "achievement" of these on a

world "scale" somehow supports the concept of a world "average" level of development of the productive forces. The concept of "accumulation balances" is nowhere defined (though also mentioned in paragraph two), so some inference is required once again. To make ours clear, we assume this to refer to the process by which markets for commodities are cleared in the exchange process, and that Amin is arguing that the demand for the means of production and means of subsistence is not satisfied by internal production in each capitalist country. This is certainly true, and in our article we demonstrated that this does not imply "world values." Again, the author presupposes what he seeks to prove by submerging that presupposition in a vague and undefined term.

We have now spent in excess of 500 words to glean the meaning from a paragraph which contains about 75. We do not consider it dogmatic to seek clarity in exposition, nor a sign of religious adherence to Marx to be impressed and guided by his precision of thought in our use of concepts. We do not object to anyone introducing "new arguments in analyzing new realities" and object to such a caricature of our discussion. Our objection is to vaguely presented arguments involving undefined terms, which leave the reader at a loss to construct the argument being made. The closest Amin comes to clarity is in his critique of the political line he considers implicit in our paper (last paragraph of the reply). In this critique he offers the familiar view that the working class of the advanced capitalist world has no revolutionary potential in the era of imperialism, and that it is the national liberation movements "in the Orient" that will bring about revolutionary change. It is characteristic of this position that he does not consider or even refer to the class nature of these movements, nor does he differentiate among them in any way, or even suggest that one might usefully do so. This reflects a host of presuppositions about the nature of imperialist rivalry, class alliances, and the conflict between imperial and national capital (see Dore and Weeks, 1977). To speak of "the East-West conflict, or [its] prolongations ["extentions?" — JW & ED] within Western society" without any reference to internal class contradictions largely substantiates our observation that Amin's work does indeed omit any meaningful class analysis.

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