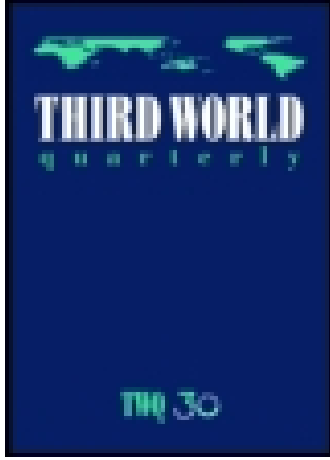


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A Reply to Samir Amin

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A Reply to Samir Amin

In his reply to his critics,¹ Samir Amin has amply demonstrated how right they are. He has made no attempt to deal with the substantive arguments raised by Warren, Schiffer, Smith and Brewer, but rather resorts to the dismissive technique of repeating some of their arguments and adding exclamation marks as proof positive of their absurdity; alternatively, when confronted with detailed and appropriate empirical evidence which might undermine his acts of faith, he describes them as 'statistical acrobatics' (p 365).

We do not intend, in this short note, to repeat arguments that have been stated elsewhere. Those who are interested in the debate are referred to the references at the end of this note. Nor will we burden the readers of this journal with a detailed textual refutation of the full array of Amin's arguments, none of which are convincing and only a few of which are new. Our intention instead is to shift the debate to the important terrain of developing Left alternatives to the simplistic and dangerous strategies offered by Amin.

However, before starting this constructive effort, we wish to record with some relief and also to highlight, certain crucial changes of position indicated by Amin's paper, for example:

In effect, capitalism develops the forces of production, but in its way, and to speak of 'stagnant' and 'blocked' capitalism does not have much meaning. But who really said that? (p 361).

Need we answer the question? Equally welcome is the following clarification of Amin's position: 'We have never claimed that imperialism implied the Third World's "stagnation"' (p 364).

Thirdly (on p 368), Amin mentions 'the rising working class' in the periphery, a category he has not previously regarded as notable or politically significant, since rising working classes tend to be associated with rising capitalism. Fourthly, discussing his analysis of 'blocked' capitalism, he admits, if a little belatedly, that 'the term is not a very good one' (p 36). Fifthly, and very importantly, he has at last demonstrated a less crudely enthusiastic approach to nationalism. In the past, we have been led to believe that all nationalism is progressive if it is anti-imperialist. Now we are told that:

The support afforded by the parties claiming to be Marxist to the local Third World bourgeoisies in the name of 'national anti-imperialist unity' is the enemy of socialism (p 374).

Sixthly, he now acknowledges movements such as feminism in the West as 'real'

¹ Samir Amin, 'Expansion or Crisis of Capitalism?', *Third World Quarterly* 5(2) April 1983.

social movements' (p 54), having, in the past, consigned them to the dust-bin of 'psychologism', 'Western Marxism' and hence pro-imperialism.²

In order to construct a Left alternative to Amin, it is important to examine what Amin has to offer by way of politics and strategy. 'Delinking' is, of course, the cornerstone of Amin-style strategy for Third World countries committed to improving the welfare of their people. He has consistently argued that, 'Delinking is . . . a strategy applicable both to socialist transition and to national liberation at every stage. The two are inseparable'.³

The most damning indictment of his approach is his deafening silence on Kampuchea. Kampuchea is the most important case of a country which had a national liberation movement committed to 'delinking', and which 'delinked'. Pol Pot and his regime were, it is clear, a gang of butchers, whose socialist aspirations and concern for the welfare of the Kampuchean people were demonstrated by genocide and torture. There is clearly no honest way in which Samir Amin can continue to evade this issue, since the 'principles' of 'socialist reconstruction' followed Amin's blueprint so closely. The only conclusion that Amin is now able to draw from the Kampuchean experience is that 'more of the same' is required in the 1980s, that future progress in Kampuchea requires the severing of relationships with Vietnam and the Soviet Union, so that socialism can be constructed on a suitably autarkic base.⁴ Such a conclusion can only be sustained by a refusal seriously to examine the consequences of autarkic strategies in the 1970s.

How does Amin arrive at the 'necessity' for 'delinking' and what are its implications?

It is not possible for the forces which aspire to advancing the outcome of the contradictions in a socialist direction to subject themselves, by too strong an insertion into the world system, to the influences of the logic of capital (p 368).

The principal contradiction is, of course, the divergent relationship between wages and productivity in the centre and the periphery, which we will discuss below. So delinking is a necessity. It is also a 'litmus test' of the real socialist intentions of national liberation movements:

the bourgeoisie in the Third World cannot conceive of its development other than through its insertion in the global system; on the contrary, delinking is a demand for national construction by the people. . . . It is because the hegemonic blocs of the so-called 'progressive' Third World countries were not, or are not, specifically 'of the people' that they cannot seriously envisage this strategy (p 374-5).

So it is all very simple: Pol Pot's regime was 'of the people'; Mugabe's, dos Santos', Machel's, the FSLN's. . . etc., are not. Such mechanistic thinking is so obviously politically dangerous that it is not surprising that some rewriting of

² See S Smith, 'Class Analysis Versus World System: critique of Samir Amin's typology of underdevelopment', *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 12(1) 1982, p 11.

³ S Amin *et al*, *Dynamics of Social Crisis*, London: Macmillan, 1982, p 218; cf. 'Delinking is not only a pre-condition for national liberation and the transition to socialism; it is also a pre-condition for eliciting a response from the people to the intervention of the super-powers and imperialism', *ibid.*, p 225.

⁴ Amin *et al.*, *ibid.*, p 218.

history is used to supplement it:

If the Soviet Union and China have managed to build themselves into autonomous forces in our world (whatever the social nature of this construction and its future may be), it is effectively because they have de-linked (p 375).

Unfortunately, a very different interpretation of Soviet economic history accords rather better with the historical facts: by 1927 the Soviet Union was the largest importer of machinery in the world, next to Britain; the volume of Soviet trade took a tremendous upward spurt over the first Five-Year Plan period, especially from 1929 to 1931, when the volume of exports increased by 46 per cent and the volume of imports by 61.5 per cent.⁵ The importance of China's trade relationships with COMECON in the period prior to 1963 is too well known to rehearse here. More recently, over the last two decades China's major trading partners have been capitalist countries, with Japan and, of the EEC traders, Germany in particular, emerging as major import suppliers. China's total hard-currency requirements in current \$US dollars rose from \$745 millions in 1960 to around \$7,600 millions in 1978.⁶ It should also be noted that to the extent that both the Soviet Union and China have experienced isolation and limited trade relations with capitalist countries, this can hardly be regarded as reflecting their own desires or strategies. The notion of 'delinking' implies an element of *choice*, which clearly has not been a significant feature of the historical experience of the two cases that Amin cites.⁷

If it is not the case that the experience of the Soviet Union and China provide a clear demonstration of the necessity for and desirability of delinking, what other arguments does Amin advance in support of his political conclusions? Amin believes that the fundamental, 'real' factor that determines or limits the prospects for social and economic change in developing economies engaging in international trade is a distinctive *economic* relationship between the growth of wages and the growth of productivity that he asserts is uniquely characteristic of peripheral states: 'in the centre, there is a parallel growth of wages and productivity, and in the periphery this parallelism is absent' (p 367).

It is difficult to understand how it might be possible to substantiate this central assertion, given that the relationship between wages and productivity varies between different advanced capitalist countries and continues to show clearly divergent trends *within* particular advanced capitalist countries—certain sectors displaying relatively fast rates of growth of wages in relation to productivity, while

⁵ See E H Carr, *Socialism in One Country (Vol. 1)*, London: Macmillan, 1958, p 711, and *Economic Trends in the Soviet Union*, Harvard University Press, 1963, p 287; for later periods see P Hanson, *Trade and Technology in Soviet-Western Relations*, London: Macmillan, 1981, especially pp 82, 86.

⁶ P Kerr, 'China's Economic Relations in South-East Asia', University of Cambridge, Faculty of Economics and Politics, *Research paper No. 15*, August 1980.

⁷ E H Carr concludes his discussion of the political debates in the Soviet Union on the role of trade by noting the emergence of a strategic consensus on this issue by 1926: 'it was indisputable that the rapid building of socialism in the Soviet Union was dependent on extensive imports of capital equipment from more advanced industrial countries, and therefore also on finding lucrative markets in those countries for Soviet products'; E H Carr *op. cit.*, p 453.

others lag some way behind. Amin simply ignores divergent trends and unevenness within advanced capitalist countries and claims that any observed differences between the relationship of wages to productivity in the US, Britain and Japan (for instance) are 'momentary', and are easily corrected by normal forms of Bourgeois State intervention, so that, in the long-run, differences between advanced capitalist countries with respect to wage/productivity movements will necessarily disappear.

This claim is not convincing. The equilibrating mechanisms which conventionally ensure that throughout all the sectors and branches of industry in one part of the world wages move automatically in line with productivity increases, while in another part of the world they do not and cannot, is never specified. If one doubts the existence of such a 'mechanism', indeed if one rejects mechanical-deterministic analyses of trends in real wages and recognises that these are the outcome of political struggles, then it is possible to reach a more positive conclusion. Namely, that in some developing countries and/or in some sectors of their economies the political struggles of an increasingly organised working class may secure increases (or at least prevent falls) in real wages, thus breaking the rigid limits and political sterility of Amin's formulation.

On the basis of what arguments or evidence does Amin insist that productivity increases in developing countries will never be matched by wage increases, that the political strength of workers in developing countries can never approximate to that achieved by their counterparts in advanced capitalist economies? Amin's main argument appears to be that the political strength of the working class in developing countries will remain insignificant because of the persistence of pre-capitalist or non-capitalist relationships in these countries, because pre-capitalist modes of production will not be 'radically' destroyed—even by the end of the twenty-first century:

The persistence of archaic modes of production integrated into the capitalist system . . . has been provisional for centuries and not even a science fiction writer would dare to say that this . . . will cease in the century to come (p 365).

When working class organisations in the Third World achieve increases in real wages, Amin explains this by a version of the labour aristocracy argument, set within a framework of compradorisation. That is to say, he alleges the existence of an alliance between the national bourgeoisie (a comprador class) and international capital, which jointly create a capital-intensive luxury goods-producing enclave of industrial production, capable only of generating a minuscule and highly-paid class of labour aristocrats. The latter are 'bought off', politically and economically, and in no sense constitute the kernel of a working class movement.

What these arguments deny is the *possibility* of change. It is inconceivable that within this framework wage labour could, even in the long run, become a significant basis for the organisation of production. It is absurd to limit one's vision of the future in this rigid way, to assert the impossibility of the emergence of a proletariat as a significant force anywhere in the Third World. The result is that any observed changes in the relationship between wages and productivity, or

indeed any changes in the balance between capitalist and pre-capitalist relations of production are just grist to this rigid mill: if wages lag behind the growth of productivity then the theoretical edifice is empirically justified; if wages keep pace with productivity (for example, as a result of trade union activity) this demonstrates the existence of a labour aristocracy and proves that the dynamic potential of capitalist production in the Third World is inherently limited by the resulting shrewdness of income distribution which prevents the expansion of the domestic market.

During the last fifty years dramatic changes have occurred in relations of production in almost all Third World countries. The nature and extent of these changes and the degree to which wage labour has emerged, has obviously varied from country to country. It is important that the specific political significance of these changes should be examined seriously, without the denial of the possibility of certain outcomes.

Conclusion: socialism—the long haul or the big bang?

The Left in the Third World, despite some major successes, has suffered a series of dramatic reversals (e.g., Egypt, Sudan, Indonesia, Guyana, Chile, Iran, Jamaica, and Kampuchea). These reversals have frequently followed the involvement of socialists in nationalist and populist movements, and have taken the form of a systematic, violent destruction of the Left by those nationalist or populist movements after certain goals, such as independence from colonial rule, have been achieved. Amin recognises the problem of the Left being 'taken in' by anti-imperialist rhetoric, but nowhere addresses the question of why the Left has persistently made this 'mistake'.

A fundamental reason for the widespread recurrence of the 'mistake' is that one major strand of analysis available to the Left has been the simplistic anti-imperialist type, to which Amin has been an important and persistent latter-day contributor. This analysis fails to address tactical and strategic questions of both immediate and longer-term political relevance. These questions concern, for example, democratisation within national liberation movements; independent control of producers over their lives and over unions, parties and other forms of popular organisation specifically geared to the articulation and defence of working class interests; prefiguration of post-independence forms of organisation within the national liberation struggle. The importance of these questions is that they determine the political orientation of the support for the struggle, and that they require national liberation movements to confront the details and practicalities of post-liberation policy and strategy, the detail of what a socialist transition actually means. These practical issues of post-liberation politics involve developing an analysis capable of addressing such specific problems as: when, and with what degree, if any, of compensation, should certain foreign firms be nationalised; how can nationalised enterprises be organised in ways that are both accountable and productive?; how can gender relations begin to be reconstructed?; how can the imported inputs required for rapid accumulation be financed?; and

what are the prospects for diversification of export earnings without short-run balance-of-payment problems?; how can independent organisations of the working class be defended in the face of powerful attacks from nationalist or state capitalist regimes?

Simplistic anti-imperialist analysis creates a major difficulty for socialists who unite with non-socialist anti-imperialist forces: they are likely to be trapped by their own rhetoric, which is an empty box labelled 'delinking', containing no practical, detailed, specific short, medium and long-term objectives concerning either the structure of the economy or the forms of social and political organisation governing control, democracy and accountability. It is not enough to 'drive the foreign devils into the sea': as they sink beneath the surface, what grounds are there to believe that the mass of the population will immediately—or even eventually—reap the fruits of substantial changes in material conditions, experience a change in their relationship to the means of production, a change in social relations in general, or a change in the relationship of the ruled to the rulers?

Samir Amin's political critique of his opponents centres on the imputation to Warren of the view that politics should consist of sitting back and waiting for the working class to emerge, i.e., doing nothing. Thus, he summarises, the impact of Warren's analysis by saying that, 'it is of no political use for anyone who wishes to act in the interests of the exploited' (p 15). Amin's view, in its bare essentials, is that capitalism cannot produce the goods, the working class will not emerge, and that socialism is inevitable.

Our view on the other hand, is that 'socialism-as-inevitable' is much more a recipe for political inactivity than its alternatives, because it does not even require a demonstration of the superiority of socialism—all that has to be done is to wait for the repugnant inadequacies of capitalism to become clear to everyone. So Amin's justification for socialism is a negative one, it is built upon the inevitable inadequacies of capitalism. It is clearly *anti*-imperialist, but what is it *pro*? What we wish to argue for is not only a recognition of the growth of capitalist relations of production in several developing countries, but, more importantly, for a positive demonstration of the superiorities of socialism, which takes account of both successes and failures, and learns from the latter. This means that we cannot ignore, for example, the experience of the Pol Pot regime in Kampuchea, as Amin seems able to do.

The distinction which we regard as most essential is that between Big Bang and Long Haul theories of the transition to socialism. Samir Amin is clearly a supporter of the Big Bang approach, in which the Axe Man Cometh to chop off all links with the international capitalist system, and socialism is then constructed on the paraplegic basis of the resulting isolation. There is no evidence at all that a decisive break with international capitalism will provide favourable conditions for the achievement of socialism. Kampuchea suggests the opposite. What we wish to argue is that far more attention to the detail of the Long Haul is required: how can growing urban and rural working class organisations begin to develop forms of control?; what are the most favourable conditions for the development, increasing

confidence and skill of such organisations?; how can prefigurative forms of organisation begin to demonstrate to a wide popular base the positive superiority of socialism?; how can material improvements be achieved in the context of democratic and accountable practices?

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