

Samir Amin, *Capitalism in the Age of Globalization*, Zed Books, London & New Jersey, 158 pp, 1997, ISBN 1-85649-468-3 (pbk); 1-85649-467-5 (hbk).

The collapsing of the welfare state in Europe; the debunking of Marxism-Leninism after the collapse of the Soviet bloc; the failure of alternative, often state-led, third world development leading to fiscal crises and necessitating interventionist 'structural adjustment programmes' by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund ... today the triumph of neo-liberalism appears well nigh secured. The ideology of 'freedom to' has gripped political discourse and has become synonymous with socio-economic development. Its economic handmaiden is free trade. The correspondent and supportive ideological stance to this regime is a rational vision of the world: the problems of poverty and stagnation are only transitional or marginal; wealth and progress will trickle down later if not sooner; and any residual difficulties will be overwhelmed by effective managerialist solutions. Fukuyama (1992) represents the textbook of this contemporary bravado. Democracy begets liberal capitalism which begets progress and modernity. There is, simply, no other way. In Fukuyama's own captivating metaphor, motley and different though they may be; all the wagon trains labouring along the trail in the search for progress will ultimately converge to this ultimate safe haven.

Captivating but disconcerting. Amin's study comes across as an anti-capitalist manifesto, an anti-Fukuyama. Even at this time, when there appears to be a wilderness of alternative conceptualisations of progress, Amin draws a complex and multi-faceted picture which challenges the capitalist project to its very foundations. If anything, Amin challenges the notion – bred out of an acute pessimism of the contemporary intellect, numbed by the strident discourse of current hegemony? – that any debate about the demise of capitalism is sterile and futile.

The message is radical, incisive, provocative, woven throughout the years in a series of impressive volumes, most notably Amin (1974). It calls itself socialist, even at the risk of being misunderstood as a recipe which has well nigh gone sour; but it is socialist to the extent of presenting an alternative, human project; an agenda which promotes the development of peripheries; the well being of the 'have-nots'; the restoration of some sense of regional balance; the eclipse of global hegemony; notions of a 'planned market' which resurrect the ideas of a New International Economic Order (NIEO) which foundered at the United Nations in 1975 (see Krasner, 1985).

Amin's thesis is radical because it is premised on structural conflict; a conflict which modern 'late capitalism' is struggling hard to cope with, not via effective

solutions but by exporting the problem elsewhere. It is a problem of economics without politics; of ambivalent attitudes to competition; of monopoly power over the critical resource areas of research, technology, capital markets, media, natural resources and military capacity.

Capitalism may have generated economic progress under certain bounded, historical conditions; but these circumstances have well nigh changed over the last half century. Indeed, the very antithesis of those conditions appears now to be in force. The legacy of structural adjustment in developing countries has been harsh and painful: 'Sharp increases in unemployment; a fall in the remuneration of work; an increase in food dependency; a grave deterioration of the environment; a deterioration of health care systems; a fall in admissions to educational institutions; a decline in the productive capacity of many nations; the sabotage of democratic systems; the continued growth of external debt' (p.13). Global players make a mockery of non-global regulatory mechanisms which are totally incapable of enforcing any redistributive measures. A deflationary spiral obliges financiers to maximise the interest, rather than the investment, potential of their money. The outcome is structural unemployment, a reality now even of the developed world. Statist remedies are unpopular and have been discredited, the state been now looked upon as the problem and no longer as the sole agent for its solution. Resulting privatisation reduces returns to the most needy and reduces still further the capacity to contest and negotiate, if only in a token manner, the unbridled forces of private capital.

The crisis of capitalism has spawned a number of disparate reactions, but these, according to Amin, do not challenge the basic premises on which the global capitalist system is based. Liberalism without borders would increase still further the levels of social and economic inequality, building in added strains into the system and obliging it still further to pass on its costs to the least powerful players, both at the core and the periphery. Nationalism is a short-term, knee-jerk response which fails to have any impact on the global architecture of power at play. Ethnicity, like nationalism, is an artificial reactionary stance which builds up a mythical frame of reference and resistance. All along, Amin contends, the real locus of power, and therefore the necessary location for any contestation, is supra-national, supra-ethnic.

The solution? Amin himself is wary in introducing the concept of 'Planning (dare I use the term?)' (p.105). He dares, knowing that the likelihood of building a convincing argument are slim. Nor is the recipe advanced an original one, as he himself is aware. The response, he declares, cannot be national because the issues at stake are of a structurally global character and would not be addressed except euphemistically at a level of political action which has been rendered virtually redundant. It cannot be at the level of existing trans- or pan- national institutions

(NAFTA, EU, ASEAN, GATT-WTO...) because these are all fabrications of a particular hegemonic order, intent on ensuring its survival. Instead, a new polycentric organisation is to be developed, bringing together specific regional groupings within a new alignment which has the potential to 'plan the market'. This is an extended nationalism, a 'market plus state' apparatus to regulate the operation, and the ideology, of free trade; to challenge the monopolistic supremacy of the status quo. Amin mentions Latin America, Africa, The Arab World, South-East Asia, India and China (the last two being the only continental developing nations). The Mediterranean is not mentioned. A slip? A reflection of a pitiful chasm of cultures which has no hope of being bridged, even in the face of glaringly common challenges?

The project may have a sustained academic argument in its defence; whether the potential exists for its praxis is a different story. How to you transform a class-in-itself to a class-for-itself? Especially if the unit of identity is not a social class? Sustained criticism of 'high capitalism' is an established tradition dating at least from Marx; through Baran and Sweezy; dependency theory, which Amin himself pioneered, along with the likes of Andre Gunder Frank and Raul Prebisch, is an important strand of this critique. The analysis of the forces of social change form a basic undercurrent within this rich literature. Amin grapples responsibly with these difficulties of operationalisation. His is at least a search which dismisses the false promises of 'capitalism without capitalists' which coloured the Soviet Revolution.

Real history is not a sequence of peaceful and predictable evolution. Nor is it a dependent epi-phenomenon of economic events. The latter is not a deterministic *deus ex machina*. The economics professors who uncritically uphold this view are wrong and alienated, misleading others in turn. Amin reminds us of an important cardinal rule, so often camouflaged by those whose interest it may be to conceal its powerful and disturbing truth: 'History is not infallibly directed by the laws of 'pure economics' It is produced by social reactions to the tendencies implied by those laws.' (p. xii & also p.103). There is therefore no economics but only political economy. It is when conceptualising economics as devoid of its crucial political component that results in the current state of global disorder. No economic system can survive for long without a stabilizing political framework of some sort (Hettne, 1995). John Maynard Keynes (1936) and Karl Polanyi (1957), most unlikely bedfellows, join Marx in Amin's tryptych of illuminaries. They are the three visionaries who share in inspiring this profound understanding of modern economics as essentially political.

It cannot be otherwise. Amin analysis the European Union and finds it wanting precisely in having failed to advance its social and political projects at the same pace of its economic one. While economic liberalisation proceeds, with a

European single currency next on the horizon, the EU has been bogged down in its capacity to boost the social conditions of its citizens and workers. Significantly to blame here is the absence of any political instrument within the EU (what is the EU anyway?) which can counter any member-state's claim to its sovereignty. The political machinery of the EU remains the Council of Ministers, which is none other than the assembly of national decision making bodies. Other organs seeking to vie for European-level power – the European Parliament? The Commission? – are still relegated to the second division of the Euro-power league. Will this political vacuum last in confrontation with the continuing globalisation of capital? If this happens, then there is a terrible future in store, predicts Amin, as Europe will be riddled by the enemy within, the product of its own rampant and soulless rationality. Perhaps a German Empire is the most realistic political prospect to avoid the social catastrophe.

These considerations have important reverberations for the Mediterranean Region. The EU may have offered a fig leaf to the Mediterranean, inviting it within its orbit with its Euro-Med programme. The non-EU member states in particular are thus finding themselves operating on the fringe of a mammoth supra-national structure whose economics transcends its political clout. Are we witnessing the 'latinamericanisation' of the Mediterranean by Europe? Is the future of EU-Med co-operation a veiled attempt at a 'compradorisation' of the region, fine-tuning it to serve even better as a dump and cushion for the economic excesses of the capitalist heartland? And if the German Fourth Reich were indeed to impose its political mechanism on the European project, what are the implications for the Mediterranean basin, where Germany has never shown much concern?

Economics is not without politics; but macro-considerations do not go without micro-ones. Amin does not fail to discuss the grass roots because the mechanisms for his socialist, regionalist internationalism must start with a local initiative. Here, he builds bridges with Touraine and Gramsci; the former in his belief in social movements with populist agendas, the latter in his belief in the power of organic intellectuals. Somehow, these individual and collective efforts will foster a wave of emancipation; somehow, this sentiment will revolutionise identities, de-link with the established world order and construct alliances across borders; somehow, these alliances will usher in a revamped socio-political regime, that which the United Nations might have been. Development agendas may thus be yet set up by people for themselves. This is a project which is elaborated in more detail in Amin (1990).

This brings me to consider education. Clearly, it is the relative autonomy of teachers in their educational environments which holds the promise of transformative change. It is they who will invite their students to approach the

economy and society and their study, either as politically neutral social facts and as the subject of social sciences (which would in turn beget only a 'livestock management' (p.134) or a social engineering approach to the field) or instead as a politically charged field of enquiry, where there is no one, correct answer, where painful and responsible choices which impact upon human liberty and equity will have to be made. Education, like capitalism, must hold true to its essentially contradictory character of socialisation and demystification: teaching its students how the system works; but not stopping there. We must teach them about the system; and, from that, how to work the system and perhaps replace it. All forms of management are essentially contestable.

What remains unclear in Amin's treatise is the relationship that globalization itself has with the forces of intended emancipatory change. Are we to assume that global capital carries the seeds of its own destruction and will spawn a new world order based on reconstituted politico-economic relations almost naturally? Would rather globalization proceed uninhibitedly along the economic route, co-opting intelligentsia on the way, rendering the new regionalization project even less likely? Or will global capitalism present an inherent dialectic, akin to Polanyi's 'double movement', eroding differences and promoting sameness of thought and action on one hand while promoting difference and indigenous responses on the other? Would the onus of transforming the potential into actual counter-hegemony be bestowed onto our scattered organic, individual and collective organic intellectuals? As a firm believer in human agency (albeit historically textured), I would concur in favour of the third, 'glocal' explanation.

'It is, after all, perfectly possible to answer the question: Can capitalism develop the Third World? with the reply: No; but all the other alternatives are even worse' (Sklair, 1994). The plan may have been an even worse scourge than the market. Amin's counter-world order may have the trappings of an unworkable utopia. But it is an alternative. History is not dead. To echo Max Weber: If we do not believe in, and pursue, the impossible, the possible will never become true.

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