

Samir Amin and beyond: the enduring relevance of Amin’s approach to political economy

Ushehwedu Kufakurinani
Ingrid Harvold Kvangraven
Maria Dyveke Styve

In moments of great uncertainty there is refuge to be found in the work of intellectual titans like Samir Amin. After the sad news of his passing in August 2018 in Paris, aged 86, we began thinking about how best to explore the enduring relevance of his analysis and concepts to make sense of contemporary crises. As we face the prospects of devastating long-term social and economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, Amin’s work inspires thinking that combines rigorous research with a commitment to radical change. In one of his latest writings, Amin (2018, 10) implores that the “challenge today is [...] not to attempt moving out of the crisis of capitalism, but to start moving out of capitalism in crisis.” Indeed, from the cyclical depressions through history to COVID-19 induced lockdowns throughout the world, capitalism has been in incessant crises. Amin’s ability to weave together thorough analysis of the polarising effects of capitalism with concrete political projects for an international radical left makes his work particularly relevant in our quest to understand capitalism, its particularities across the world, and oppositions to it. There is a younger generation of scholars that is particularly hungry for Amin’s perspectives, one that came of age in a time where the universities have been thoroughly marketised and moulded by neoliberal processes, and where intellectual production and debates are not necessarily embedded within social struggles. The pertinence and analytical heft of Amin’s critique of capitalism may be particularly important in the contemporary period marked by the interconnected crises related to COVID-19, Black Lives Matter, the climate emergency, and looming debt crises across the periphery. In the years ahead, confronting these multiple and intertwined crises will require the kind of commitment to combining research with political engagement that Amin demonstrated.

This special issue seeks to stimulate critical engagement with Amin’s work from a range of perspectives, and to show how his concepts and ways of thinking continue to inspire today. We are not offering any definite answers or a comprehensive overview of Amin’s wide-ranging and vast intellectual oeuvre. Rather we want to open up a space, across disciplines and generations, to reflect on how Amin’s work challenges our thinking, and how his approach and concepts can be used, critiqued and expanded in various contexts. For Samir Amin’s account of his personal journey and how and why his Marxism develops in the way it does see his two volume autobiography (Amin 2006; 2019a).

Amin pushes us to think creatively in structural, temporal, and political ways that often defy disciplinary boundaries. The combination of truly global perspectives with analysis that is finely contextualised within particular geographical locations, and mindful of the complex nature of political conflicts and different class interests, makes his contributions to dependency theory especially rich. His ability to show how development and underdevelopment are inextricably intertwined, or “two sides of the same coin” (Amin, 2018, 9), while pushing beyond any simple dichotomies, makes his work inspiring to many of us that are critical of mainstream development

narratives. The articles in this issue illustrate precisely how some of Amin's key concepts allow for a type of analysis that can weave together a critical and structural *longue durée* approach with an examination of social, economic and political conditions that are rooted in a particular place and time. It is also clear from the contributions in this issue that Amin's (2018) insistence on the embedded nature of imperialism in contemporary capitalism continues to be an inspiration, as is his notion of delinking in order to promote national sovereign projects (Amin 1990).

The Enduring Relevance of Amin's Approach

As we demonstrate in this special issue, Samir Amin's work opens up many interesting entry points from which to explore the contemporary world. While he developed many concrete concepts (law of worldwide value, unequal exchange, eurocentrism - to name but a few!) and shed light on many concrete issues (e.g. barriers to autonomous industrialisation, monetary dependence, decolonisation), we believe his method of inquiry is the aspect of his work that is the most enduring and that holds the most promise for driving radical political economy in his spirit forward.

In line with this, we highlight four key methods of inquiry that are of fundamental importance: 1) thinking structurally, 2) thinking temporally, 3) thinking politically, and 4) thinking creatively.

Thinking structurally

At a time when much of social science has come to be centered around either methodological individualism or methodological nationalism – the notions that individuals and nation states, respectfully, are the most relevant units of analysis – , Amin's attention to global *structures*, that underpin an international system of exploitation, is a much needed contrast. We would like to draw attention to two key structures of importance for Amin, namely the structure of the global *economy*, and the structural prejudice of *eurocentrism* which distorts social theories.

Taking the structure of the global economy as a starting point led Amin to explore concepts such as core-periphery relations, imperialism and unequal exchange. Amin (1974) recognised that the global capitalist system is polarising and that the polarisation between the centre and the periphery was a key part of this. Note that Amin went beyond thinking only in core-periphery terms - which dependency theorists are often critiqued for - as he identified a range of classes of importance across both the core and periphery, including the imperialist bourgeoisie of the core, the proletariat in the core, the dependent bourgeoisie of the periphery, the proletariat of the periphery, the peasantries of the periphery and the oppressive classes of the non-capitalist modes of production (Amin 2010, see also Ghosh in this issue).

Moreover, it is easier to understand the complexity and the systemic nature of the structures that Amin points to, by taking a holistic and transdisciplinary approach. This led him to argue:

"The only possible science is the science of society, for social reality is one: it is never "economic" or "political" or "ideological," etc., even though social reality can be approached, up to a certain point, from a particular angle—that of any one of the traditional university disciplines (economics, sociology, political science)."

Samir Amin, 1974: 5.

This is why this special issue does not limit itself to economic analyses, but cuts across disciplinary boundaries to draw on insights from history, politics, gender studies, and decolonial studies. It is also important to note that thinking structurally does not mean thinking deterministically. While Amin was ‘capable of a very high level of abstraction’ and some could see his characterisations as sweeping (Ghosh, this issue: p xx), he was always ready to adapt his categories and understandings as the world changed, and his understanding of how outcomes were shaped was first and foremost dialectic - which led him to critique World Systems Theory for being static and for prioritising global relations over domestic (Kvangraven 2017).

Macheda and Nadalini apply structural thinking in their article for this special issue, as they show how Amin’s work offers a theoretical basis to demystify narratives about how China opened up to the global economy. Their investigation into how China was able to integrate itself into the global economy without abandoning its strategy of delinking from imperialism opens up space for further research and theorising about how different strategies for national development can be anti-imperialist. Furthermore, Fatimah Musthaq’s and Ndongo Samba Sylla’s articles in this special issue apply a structural way of thinking about financial and monetary dependencies. Mushtaq explores how Amin’s work on imperialist rent can be extended to understand financial dependencies and hierarchies in a financialised global economy, while Sylla explores Amin’s approach to the monetary mechanisms and functioning of the banking sectors in peripheral countries which contribute to keeping them underdeveloped, with a specific focus on the CFA Zone.

Identifying eurocentrism as a structural prejudice allowed Amin (1988/2009) to show how social theories disguise the imperialist and racist foundations of the capitalist system. This is important because it allows us to see that the Enlightenment values and promise of rationality and universality are actually heavily biased and founded on a colonial and racist project. This is key for understanding why societies cannot develop by imitating the West. While Amin critiques how European claims to universalism were intimately tied to conquest and ideas about superiority, he also advances the idea that other humanist forms of universalism are possible and necessary; “at the level of the elaboration of a universal human project allowing the supersession of the historical limits of capitalism itself” (Amin, 2009, 102).

Generally, eurocentrism has been taken as an important starting point for scholars who build further on Amin as well as critics. Ndlovu-Gatsheni (this issue), for example, revisits Marxism and decolonisation via the legacy of Amin to re-evaluate Amin’s critical Marxist political economy in the context of epistemology, to unmask racism and the trans-historic expansion of colonial domination. Ndlovu-Gatsheni’s exploration of how this shapes patterns of domination and decolonial endeavours, demonstrates the rich discussions that can be engaged with about epistemology, decoloniality, decolonisation and eurocentrism using Amin as a starting point. This is particularly relevant now as many social science disciplines are finally forced to reckon with their colonial origins and consider what decolonising the curriculum and the university means.

Thinking temporally

Thinking temporally was key for Samir Amin's understanding of the world, and more specifically, thinking in *longue durée* terms. Amin identifies himself as being a part of the school of global historical materialism, in which he sees the historical spread of global capitalism as key to understanding the polarisation between the core and periphery (Kvangraven 2017). This is an important entry point for exploring contemporary problems, because it opens the door for analyzing how imperialist relations have historically and contemporarily shaped the possibilities for development in the Global South. In this issue, Jayati Ghosh lays out how Amin's approach to imperialism remains relevant across key axes such as technology, finance, and the search for and effort to control new markets, despite changing global configurations such as the 'rise' of the BRICS.

Perez's and Sylla's articles in this special issue are also particularly good illustrations of how a historical perspective is important for understanding contemporary problems. For example, Perez's explanation of the East Asian 'miracle' starts from how those countries developed historically and geopolitically. Perez also demonstrates how China's contemporary delinking must be understood by starting from their attempt at socialist delinking in 1949, and the complex battle between statist, capitalist, and socialist forces that played out since then. Similarly, Sylla's article shows how the colonial origins of the CFA is key for understanding how it operates today. Tracing the history of the CFA also makes it painfully clear why defending the monetary status quo for Amin amounts to defending the perpetuation of the old colonial order.

Thinking politically

In line with Marx's (1988:65) famous phrase, interpreting the world is important, but 'the point, however, is to change it,' Amin never shied away from admitting that his work was driven by political ambitions to change the world. We find this inspiring and necessary at a time where the economics field in particular likes to cloak itself in deceitfully 'objective' language, even though knowledge production in the social sciences is necessarily ideological.

In Amin's book on Delinking (1990), he provides a tangible and critical assessment of ways to promote autonomous development in the periphery. Far from any call for autarky, delinking entails "the refusal to submit national-development strategy to the imperatives of 'globalization'" (Amin 1987, 435) and the promotion of popular and auto-centered development rather than unilaterally adjusting to the demands of the global economic system. Both Perez' and Macheda and Nadalini's articles in this issue, which center on delinking strategies, demonstrate how social science research is often used for political ends given how Chinese and East Asian delinking strategies are often misunderstood (or miscommunicated) in mainstream narratives about their 'success'.

Thinking creatively

Finally, it is important to be creative in the way we apply Amin's method to understand social phenomena. Amin (2010) called himself a 'creative Marxist', by which he meant he would start from, rather than to stop at Marx. We find this approach from Amin to be particularly relevant to understand contemporary problems and especially from a Global South perspective. Starting from

Marx allows for an understanding of class struggle, exploitation, and the polarising tendencies of capitalism, while going deeper into inequalities associated with imperialism, sexism and racism. Amin started this work, but we believe it is relevant to go beyond Amin. Indeed, we find it relevant to start from Amin, not to stop at Amin.

Beyond Samir Amin

Several contributions to this special issue take Amin as a starting point for further exploration and theoretical development. Some also point in the direction of key critiques that have been leveled at Amin's work, notwithstanding his powerful and incisive theoretical and analytical interventions on how developing economies relate with the North. We would like to first highlight key areas where this special issue encourages going 'beyond' Amin's original work in order to explore contemporary problems or issues that Amin may have missed, before reflecting on how his work will live on 'beyond' his own lifetime.

In terms of fruitful areas where Amin's work can be extended, challenged, and further developed, we focus on gender, ecological destruction, the role of the state in shaping autonomous development, financialisation, and eurocentrism.

First of all, although Amin himself did not include gender in his analysis (indeed, his analysis had glaring blind spots related to gender), his analysis can be enriched and extended to include gender hierarchies and a fuller recognition of gender's place in the mode of production. Catherine Scott's article in the special issue is crucial for opening this door to understanding both the limitations to Amin and how gender can be approached from within his framework of analysis. She asks, for example, how gender may be included in analyses of delinking and the importance of discussions about relations in the households when considering how a revolution may occur.

Secondly, in a historical moment where we cannot speak about autonomous industrialisation without considering ecological destruction, the need to explore how the two are interrelated and both shaped by imperialism is more important than ever. Max Ajl's article in this special issue starts from Amin's theories of ecology to make broader analyses of the currents of ecological dependency that developed out of North African dependency analysis. He shows how Amin's theoretical framework can be connected to that of Mohamed Dowidar, Fawzy Mansour and Slaheddine el-Amami and their advancement of the case for smallholder-centred national development. Given the urgent need to tackle climate change, its imperial characteristics, and the uneven geographical impacts of the destruction it causes, Amin's framework serves as a useful starting point for thinking about ecological unequal exchange. As Ajl writes, 'If Amin could not see the entirety of the necessary developmental path, he still illuminated its borders with a brilliant radiance...' (p. xx).

Furthermore, given the partial retreat and limited autonomy of the peripheral state in the context of the increasing power of international finance (Patnaik 2018), Amin's view of the state's power to delink and stimulate auto-centric industrialisation must be scrutinised. We appreciate Ndlovu-Gatsheni's contribution here, as he takes Amin as a point of departure while also somewhat diverging from Amin's political orientation towards the nation state. He points to Amin's commitment to a polycentric world as a departure point towards de-imperialisation, deracialisation, depatriarchisation, decorporatisation, detribalisation and democratisation, where

the core is the internationalism of the people, not of the states. This is important in light of recent critiques of Amin's conceptualisation of delinking as a process that holds the state as the locus of change (e.g. Robinson 2011).

Similarly, Fatimah Mushtaq's work adapts Amin's categories to a financialised global economy, as she explores how imperialist rent is not limited to labour arbitrage but also includes *financial arbitrage*. Her article thus provides 'an updated understanding of dependency in the context of financialisation,' (p. X) as she centers financial factors to demonstrate how they contribute to reproducing global inequalities and the periphery's subordinate position. This is of particular relevance given the important role that capital flows, interest rates, and exchange rates play in reproducing subordinate relations today.

What's more, Ndlovu-Gatsheni's work on decoloniality (in this issue and beyond) shows the need for decolonial knowledge production in order to break with eurocentric approaches, which is especially important given that Amin's work on *Eurocentrism* has itself been criticised for demonstrating economic reductionism (e.g. Mazama 1995). This is yet another area where we believe Amin opens the door for important reflections and debates about how racism, eurocentrism, and capitalism are intertwined, but that we must move beyond his initial reflections to broaden the debates about how racism and imperialism shape society.

Amin's work was published in the very first issue of ROAPE in 1974. It was a powerful intervention that set out his model of the global accumulation of capital. He was interviewed for this journal in 2014 and again in 2017 when he stressed the continued need for socialist analysis of the continent. Both discussions with Amin highlighted his immense knowledge of global dynamics of capitalism, how they were impacting on Africa, what lessons could be learnt from comparative experiences of underdevelopment, including his many trips to China and crucially, how Africans were struggling to develop alternative agendas for development. That was something that had been at the core of his life and for 30 years he was the Director of Third World Forum, Dakar where he helped set practical and intellectual agendas for socialist transformation on the continent engaging with the recognition, among other things, that the revolutionary forces for social transformation would likely emerge from peasants and small holder farmers rather than an industrial working class (Amin & Bush 2014; Amin & Zeilig 2017, see also ROAPE 2018). We therefore see ROAPE as being a natural home for this issue, and we are very grateful to the ROAPE editors for their fantastic support in bringing it to fruition.

To conclude, we hope this Special Issue will inspire more scholars to engage with Amin's ideas and also explore their relevance for emerging social and political problems. We believe it is important to ensure that Amin's thinking, both in terms of concrete theoretical developments and in terms of thinking structurally, politically, temporally and creatively, survive beyond his lifetime. To this end, the articles contained in this special issue show how Amin's work continues to inspire incisive scholarship on development, dependency and delinking in our contemporary world. In particular, Amin's methods of inquiry provide avenues towards doing research that transverses disciplinary boundaries and that aims to interrogate the social world as a whole. Notwithstanding important critiques of Amin's work, the articles in this issue engage with his core concepts and demonstrate both their potency and how they can be creatively expanded and built upon. Amin's

legacy provides a lighthouse for those who not only want to understand the world, but fundamentally change it, by combining rigorous scholarship with political commitment and action.

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