

The Universality of Marx

(Loren Goldner)

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A strange anomaly dominates the current social, political and cultural climate. World capitalism has for over fifteen years been sinking into its worst systemic crisis since the 1930's, and one which in its biospheric dimensions is much worse than the 1930's. At the same time, the social stratum which calls itself the left in Europe and the U.S. is in full retreat. In many advanced capitalist countries, and particularly in the U.S., that stratum increasingly suspects the world outlook of Karl Marx, which postulates that capitalism brings such crises as storm clouds bring the rain, of being a "white male" mode of thought. Stranger still is the fact that the relative eclipse of Marx has been carried out largely in the name of a "race/gender/class" ideology that can sound, to the uninitiated, both radical and vaguely Marxian. What this "discourse" (to use its own word) has done, however, is to strip the idea of class of exactly that element which, for Marx, made it radical: its status as a universal oppression whose emancipation required (and was also the key to) the abolition of all oppression.

This question of the status of universality, whether attacked by its opponents as "white male", or "Eurocentric", or a "master discourse", is today at the center of the current ideological debate, as one major manifestation of the broader world crisis of the waning 20th century.

The writings of Marx and Engels include assertions that the quality of relations between men and women is the surest expression of the humanity of a given society, that the communal forms of association of peoples such as the North American Iroquois were anticipations of communism, and that the suppression of matriarchal by patriarchal forms of kinship in ancient Greece was simultaneous with the generalization of commodity production, that is, with proto-capitalism. Marx also wrote, against the Enlightenment's simple-minded linear view of progress that, short of the establishment of communism, all historical progress was accompanied by simultaneous retrogressions. But most of this is fairly well known; this is not what bothers contemporaries. What bothers them is that the concept of universality of Marx and Engels was ultimately grounded neither in cultural constructs or even in relations of "power", which is the currency in which today's fashion trades.

The universalism of Marx rests on a notion of humanity as a species distinct from other species by its capacity to periodically revolutionize its means of extracting wealth from nature, and therefore as free from the relatively fixed laws of population which nature imposes on other species. "Animals reproduce only their own nature", Marx wrote in the 1844 Manuscripts, "but humanity reproduces all of nature". Nearly 150 years later, the understanding of ecology contained in that line remains in advance of most of the contemporary movements known by that name. Human beings, in contrast to other species, are not fixed in their relations with the environment by biology, but rather possess an infinite capacity to create new environments and new selves in the process. Human history, in this view, is the history of these repeated revolutions in nature and thus in "human nature".

What bothers contemporary leftist opinion about Marx is that the latter presents a formidable (and, in my opinion, unanswerable) challenge to the currently dominant culturalism, which is so pervasive that it does not even know its own name.

Today, the idea that there is any meaningful universality based on human beings as a species is under a cloud, even if the opponents of such a view rarely state their case in so many words (or are even aware that this is the issue). For them, such an idea, like the idea that Western Europe from the Renaissance onward was a revolutionary social formation unique in history, that there is any meaning to the idea of progress, or that there exist criteria from which one can judge the humanity or inhumanity of different “cultures”, are “white male” “Eurocentric” constructs designed to deny to women, peoples of color, gays or ecologists the “difference” of their “identity”.

Edward Said, for example, has written a popular book called *Orientalism* which presents the relations between the West and the Orient (and implicitly between any two cultures) as the encounter of hermetically-sealed “texts” which inevitably distort and degrade. In this encounter, according to Said, the West from early modern times counterposed a “discourse” of a “dynamic West” to a “decadent, stagnant” Orient. Since Said does not even entertain the possibility of world-historical progress, the idea that Renaissance Europe represented an historical breakthrough for humanity, which was, by the 15th century, superior to the social formations of the Islamic world is not even worth discussing. Such a view not only trivializes the breakthrough of Renaissance Europe; it also trivializes the achievements of the Islamic world, which from the 8th to the 13th centuries towered over the barbaric West, as well as the achievements of T’ang and Sung China, which during the same centuries probably towered over both of them. One would also never know, reading Said, that in the 13th century the flower of Islamic civilization was irreversibly snuffed out by a “text” of Mongol hordes (presumably also Oriental) who levelled Bagdad three times. Were Said somehow transported back to the wonder that was Islamic civilization under the Abbasid caliphate, the Arabs and Persians who helped lay the foundations for the European Renaissance would have found his culturalism strange indeed, given the importance of Plato and Aristotle in their philosophy and of the line of prophets from Moses to Jesus in their theology. Said’s text-bound view of the hermetically-sealed relations between societies and in world history (which for him does not meaningfully exist) is the quintessential statement of a culturalism that, which a pretense of radicalism, has become rampant in the past two decades.

Martin Bernal has written a book called *Black Athena* which current fashion likes to lump with Said’s, even though it rests on the opposite view of the relations between cultures, and does not deny the existence of progress in history. Bernal’s book is sub-titled “The Afro-Asiatic Roots of Classical Civilization”, and is an attempt to show precisely how Egyptian (and therefore African) and Phoenician (and therefore Semitic) cultures influence the Greek achievement in antiquity. For Bernal, this is not an attempt to trivialize the Greek breakthrough, but rather, as he states from the outset, to restore it to the true dimension which modern racist and anti-Semitic classicism had obfuscated, by setting it against its real backdrop of dialogue with other cultures. If Said had titled his book “The Hellenistic Roots of Islamic Civilization” or “The Islamic Roots of the European Renaissance”, he would be much closer to Bernal than he is, but then he would have written a different, and far better book, one not likely to become popular in the “era of Foucault”.

In such a climate, then, it is quite refreshing to read Samir Amin's *Eurocentrism*, a book by an Egyptian Marxist intellectual whose critique of Western ethnocentrism, including actually Eurocentric variants of Marxism, is not made from a relativizing discourse of cultural "difference" incapable of making critical judgements. Amin's critique of Eurocentric Marxism is not aimed at the latter's (unfulfilled) aspirations to universality, but rather on the premise that such Marxism IS NOT UNIVERSAL ENOUGH. Amin seeks a "way to strengthen the universalist dimension of historical materialism". He has plenty of problems of his own, though they are of another order. But his book has merits which should be highlighted before people read no further than the title and assimilate it too quick to the genre established by Said (whose world view Amin characterizes, drawing on the earlier critique by Sadek Jalal el-Azm, as "provincial").

Amin, who understands the "species" dimension of Marx's thought, believes many unfashionable things. He believes that there has been progress in world history, that such progress obviously antedated the emergence of the West, that the social formation that engendered Renaissance Europe was revolutionary, unique in world history, and superior to any that had preceded it, and that its achievements, including science and rationality, had laid the foundations for further historical progress, which must clearly go BEYOND the West.

In the first section of the book, presenting an overview of the mainly Mediterranean "tributary" (pre-capitalist) societies prior to the Renaissance, Amin lays out a theory of successive innovations, from ancient Egypt onward, which were breakthroughs for humanity as a whole, and which made possible further universal breakthroughs. "The universalist moral breakthrough of the Egyptians", writes Amin, "is the keystone of subsequent human thought". Later, in ancient Greece, there was "an explosion in the fields of scientific abstraction" in which "empiricist practice— as old as humankind itself—finally came to pose questions of the human mind that required a more systematic effort of abstraction". The accomplishments of ancient Egypt, moreover, later evolved to an all-encompassing metaphysics that furnishes Hellenism, and later Islam and Christianity, with their point of departure, as the thinkers of the period themselves recognized."

One might quarrel, even substantially, with the specific emphases of Amin's account of the creation, over several millennia, of what he characterizes as the general synthesis of "medieval metaphysics" in which the (Moslem) Averroes, the (Jew) Maimonides and the (Christian) Aquinas without qualms read, critique and borrowed from each other. But Amin is certainly right that the origins of Eurocentrism came from reading out of history the common Eastern Mediterranean origins of the medieval era in which Islam was long superior to barbaric Western Christendom, and out of which the capitalist West emerged. This artificial isolation of the Greek breakthrough from its broader context made it possible to forget both the earlier phase in ancient Egypt and particularly the later contribution of Hellenistic Alexandria upon which both Christianity and Islam drew so heavily, and later transmitted to Europe. In Amin's view, it was precisely the backwardness of Europe relative to the Islamic Mediterranean that made the next breakthrough possible there, where it did not have to confront the sophisticated medieval metaphysics of Islam. And presumably no one will call Amin an "Orientalist" when he notes "the reduction of human reason to its single deductive dimension" by Christian and Islamic metaphysics and when he regrets that "contemporary Arab thought has still not escaped from it".

Amin's critique of Eurocentrism is not, as we said, the latter's affirmation of modern capitalism's uniqueness and, for a certain historical period, (now long over) its contribution to human progress. He aims his fire at capitalism's rewriting of history to create an imaginary "West" which could alone have produced its breakthroughs. By rejecting the attempt to discover universal historical laws that would accurately situate the West's achievement with respect to all the societies who helped build its foundations (in the way that Bernal does for ancient Greece) the West created a powerful ideology denying the global historical laws that produced it, thereby undermining the very universal character of its achievement, and "eternalizing" progress as unique to the West, past, present and future. In Amin's own words, worth quoting at length:

"The dominant ideology and culture of the capitalist system cannot be reduced solely to Eurocentrism... But if Eurocentrism does not have, strictly speaking, the status of a theory, neither is it simply the sum of the prejudices, errors and blunders of Westerners with respect to other peoples. If that were the case, it would only be one of the banal forms of ethnocentrism shared by all peoples at all times. The Eurocentric distortion that marks the dominant capitalist culture negates the universalist ambition on which that culture claims to be founded... Enlightenment culture confronted a real contradiction that it could not overcome by its own means. For it was self-evident that nascent capitalism which produced capitalism had unfolded in Europe. Moreover, this embryonic new world was in fact superior, both materially and in many other aspects, to earlier societies, both in its own territories (feudal Europe) and in other regions of the world (the neighboring Islamic Orient and the more distant Orients...) The culture of the Enlightenment was unable to reconcile the fact of this superiority with its universalist ambition. On the contrary, it gradually drifted toward racism as an explanation for the contrast between it and other cultures... The culture of the Enlightenment thus drifted, beginning in the nineteenth century, in nationalistic directions, impoverished in comparison with its earlier cosmopolitanism."

In light of the above, it goes without saying that Amin has no use for Islamic fundamentalism and other Third Worldist culturalisms, which he diagnoses as an anti-universalist provincialism existing in counterpoint to the provincialism of Said and of the post-modern critics of "white male thinking" (Amin does not use the latter term; I do). This conflation of "white male" with the humanist universalism produced by world history actually reproduces dominant ideology by denying that the Renaissance was a breakthrough in a broader human history and by failing to recognize the contributions of "non-whites" to key aspects of "Western" culture, as Bernal showed in *Black Athena*. (Bernal leaves to black nationalists the problem of putting together his corroboration of the African dimension of ancient Egypt, which they have always maintained, with his claim that it had an important influence on Greek culture, which they have always denounced as "white".) Neither Eurocentric provincialism nor anti-Western provincialism draws much solace from a truly universalist approach to history.

But despite these undeniable strengths of Amin's Eurocentrism, Amin's book is deeply flawed by its own baggage, of quite another type. What Amin gives brilliantly in his diagnosis, he takes away clumsily in his prescription for treatment. I apply to him the same critique he applies to the Eurocentrists: he is not universal enough. His own universalism is not that of the global class of working people exploited by capitalism, but that of an ideologue of Third World autarchy. He sets out "to strengthen the universal dimension of historical materialism" but winds up only presenting in

slightly modified language the kind of Marxism whose debacle in the 1970's helped to spawn post-modernism in the first place. Amin's universalism is not that of the international working class and its allies, but that of the STATE. The post-modernists' point of departure is their assertion that all universalism is necessarily a concealed apology for power, as in the power of the state. Amin, unfortunately, will not disabuse them.

Who is Samir Amin? He is perhaps best remembered as the author of the two-volume *Accumulation on a World Scale*, which, like Eurocentrism and most of his other books, have been translated and published, not accidentally, by Monthly Review Press. He might be less charitably remembered as one of the more outspoken apologists of the Pol Pot regime in Cambodia in the years 1975-1978, persisting even when it became known that the Khmer Rouge's near-genocidal policy had killed 1 million of Cambodia's 8 million people. Cambodia is in fact an example of Amin's strategy of "de-linking", which repeated unhappy experience has taught him to call a "national popular democratic" strategy, since neither the Soviet Union nor China nor Pol Pot's Cambodia can be plausibly characterized as "socialist". (Cambodia, significantly, is not mentioned once in *Eurocentrism*.)

Amin belongs to a constellation of thinkers, including Bettelheim, Pailloix, Immanuel and Andre Gunder Frank, who worked off the ideas of Baran and Sweezy and who became known, in the post-World War II period as the partisans (not of course uniformly agreeing among themselves) of the "monopoly capital" school of Marxism. The "Monthly Review" school, which had its forum in the publishing house and journal of the same name, evolved from the 1940's to the 1980's, liked "anti-imperialist" movements and regimes, and believed that "de-linking" (to use Amin's term) was the only road by which such movements and regimes (which they then tended to call socialist) could develop backward countries. This inclination led them from Stalin's Russia to Mao's China, by way of Sukharno's Indonesia, Nkrumah's Ghana, Ben Bella's Algeria to Castro's Cuba. Most of the time, they came away disappointed. They went with China in the Sino-Soviet split. The post-Mao evolution cooled them on China, but this disappointment was quickly followed by Pol Pot's Cambodia, the expulsion of the (ethnic Chinese) boat people from Vietnam, the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia, the Sino-Vietnamese border war of 1979, and China's virtual alliance with the U.S., It was hard, in those years, to be "anti-imperialist" forces were all at war with each other, and when China was being armed by the biggest imperialist of them all. With the fundamentalist turn of the Iranian revolution for good measure, by 1980 a lot of people, including people in the Third World, were coming to the conclusion that that "anti-imperialism" by itself was not enough, and some were even coming to think that there was such a thing as a REACTIONARY anti-imperialism. Finally, around the same time, countries like South Korea and Taiwan emerged as industrial powers, not by autarchy, but by using the world market and the international division of labor, which Amin and his friends had always said was impossible.

De-linking is a fancy name for an idea first developed by Joseph Stalin called "socialism in one country". (Amin thinks that Stalin was too hard on the peasants, but he has never said what he thought about the millions who died during Mao's "Great Leap Forward".) Amin and the school he comes out of base their world strategy on a theory of "uneven development" which they see as a permanent by-product of capitalism. This in itself is fine, and was worked out in more sophisticated fashion by Trotsky 80 years ago. For Amin and his co-thinkers, de-linking is a strategy to break the

“weak links” in the chain of international capitalism. Karl Marx also had a theory of “weak links”, which he called “permanent revolution”, a term significantly never used by Amin, probably, again, because of its Trotskyist connotations. Marx applied it to Germany in 1848, where it explained the ability of the German workers, because of the weakness of the German bourgeoisie, to go beyond bourgeois liberalism to socialism in the struggle for democracy, hence giving the revolution a “permanent” character. Leon Trotsky applied same theory in Russia after 1905, and was alone, prior to 1917, in foreseeing the possibility of a working-class led revolution in backward Russia.

But Marx and Trotsky, unlike Amin, did not propose that the workers in “weak link” countries “de-link” from the rest of the world. They saw the working class as an international class, and saw German and then Russian workers as potential leaders in a world revolutionary process. Following this logic, the Bolshevik revolutionary strategy of 1917 was entirely predicated on a successful revolution in Germany for its survival. When the German revolution failed, the Russian revolution was isolated and besieged. Only when Stalin proposed the previous unheard-of grotesquery of “socialism in one country”, and the draconian autarchy it implied, did “de-linking” first enter the arsenal of “socialism”.

Although Amin and his Monthly Review colleagues rarely spell out their origins so clearly, their theory rests on the defeat, not on the victory, of the world revolutionary wave of 1917-1921. Amin’s theory takes from Marx’s notion of permanent revolution only the “weak link” aspect. Amin thinks that “de-linking” saves the workers and peasants of the de-linked country from the bloody process of primitive accumulation imposed by Western capitalism, but it only legitimates that same process, now carried out by the local “anti-imperialist” elite. The workers and peasants of Cambodia, for example, learned this lesson the hard way. Amin’s theory also “de-links” the workers and peasants of the Third World from the one force whose intervention (as the early Bolsheviks understood) could spare them that ordeal: the international working-class movement. (Amin thinks socialist revolution by working people in the West is essentially a pipedream; he at least has the honesty to say so. Amin’s theory, finally, links the workers and peasants in the “de-linked” countries, under the auspices of “national popular democracy” (he does not dare call it socialism, as he and others used to) to Mao, Pol Pot and their possible future progeny, who substitute themselves for Western capitalists and carry out that accumulation under the rhetoric of “building socialism”. That is why it is appropriate to call Amin’s theory that of a Third World bureaucratic elite, and his universalism a universalism of the state.

All of this is stated only allusively in Eurocentrism; Amin’s book *De-Linking* (which appeared in French in 1985, and which will soon appear in English) is more explicit. In the latter book at least, Amin gingerly raises the question of Cambodia, where he speaks (as such people always do) of “errors”, but nowhere does he say why “de-linking” will work any better the next time.

One can therefore only regret that Samir Amin’s spirited defense of some of the most important aspects of Marx, so maligned in the current climate of post- modern culturalism, as well as his much-needed attempt to go beyond Eurocentric Marxism, conjugates so poorly with his “national popular democratic” strategy of de-linking. “National” and “popular” were also words central to the language of fascism, and none of the regimes Amin has praised over the years for “de-linking” have a trace of democracy about them. The next breakthrough in world history has to go BEYOND the exploitation which characterizes world capitalism, in the “periphery” AND in the “core”. Recent

history has seen enough cases where “de-linking” has led to autarchic meltdowns that have tragically led millions of people in places like Poland, the Soviet Union, China and Cambodia to think that Western capitalism has something positive to offer them. It doesn't. But neither does Samir Amin.