Challenging Eurocentrism

by Juliet Ucelli and Dennis O'Neil

WHY TALK ABOUT EUROCENTRISIM NOW?

Ongoing battles over the content of social studies classes in public schools and the canon in liberal arts education are thrusting the term "eurocentrism" toward the mainstream of political discourse in the United States. It is a concept which has been fairly easy for those of us on the left to become comfortable with, but there is a sense that we could actually pose a problem of complacency for revolutionary socialists. The fact is that the critique of eurocentrism is still in its early stages, and that the extraordinarily pervasive hold this framework has on the thinking of everyone raised in Western societies is not fully appreciated. And the problem of what kind of worldview it is to be replaced with has barely been considered.

The point, then, is that eurocentrism will not be understood, neutralized or superseded without considerable effort and, as shown by the current counterattack waged by the bourgeoisie against "political correctness," without fierce struggle.

A good starting point in thinking about eurocentrism is the recent spate of books produced by African, North American and European academics. They have thrown down the gauntlet inside classics, comparative linguistics, economic history, sociology and other academic disciplines. This recent scholarship builds on the pioneering work of African American scholars like C.L.R. James and W.E.B. DuBois, whose work was marginalized by white supremacist academia, yet studied continuously over the past fifty years by organic intellectuals of color and some white leftists.

Another foundation is the insistence on the centrality of culture, psychology and the internalization of oppression coming from African thinkers like Frantz Fanon, Amilcar Cabral and Cheikh Anta Diop.

To some extent, a critique of eurocentrism is implicit in the opposition to imperialism which (however flawed) has characterized the revolutionary wing of the socialist movement since the time of Lenin. However, at least until Mao's writings became an influence, European socialists generally grasped more easily the concepts of the super-exploitation and victimization of non-European peoples and had more difficulty recognizing their scientific achievements and cultural contributions. The concept of eurocentrism as currently used pays more attention to precisely this aspect: the distortion of the consciousness and self-knowledge of humanity by the insistence of people of European descent that all valid, "universal" scientific knowledge, economic progress, political structures and works of art flow only from their ancestors. Or, in its more subtle form, eurocentrism acknowledges contributions from non-European cultures but says that if they're important enough, they'll be subsumed within the Western legacy; that the current global cultural marketplace will automatically absorb and disseminate any new cultural products of universal validity.

The Eurocentric version of human development is a key ideological underpinning of white supremacy. It serves to legitimate Euro-North American domination by claiming that it (also known as modernity, technological progress, the free market) advances the best interests of all humanity. When necessary, this belief in Euro-North American cultural superiority must also be reinforced by brute force. Conservative columnist George Will portrays the relationship of the Eurocentric knowledge system to naked domination quite candidly in his justification for the war against Iraq:

"This is, in part, a didactic war. [Iraq was] transgressing values most clearly enunciated by the United States, the symbol of modern political values and cultural modernity...The hope is that the war will pry parts of Arabia into participation in the modernity that is capable of such technological prowess and moral purpose. Both that prowess and that purpose derive from freedom...The mighty U.S. sword guarantees the pre-eminence of the American pen."

In the United States, the developing critique of eurocentrism emphasizes consciousness, i.e. ways of thinking, values, works of art and theories, and does not yet address social institutions and structures. This orientation toward consciousness is doubtless influenced by the greater mainstream recognition, over the past few years, of the contributions to cultural production by people of African, Asian and Native descent. While people of color were always the unacknowledged creators of much U.S. popular music, art and fashion styles, filmmakers like Spike Lee, fashion designers like the late Willi Smith, culture critics and trendsetters like bell hooks, Cornel West, Henry Louis Gates Jr., novelists like Alice Walker and Toni Morrison, and multi-genre musical masterminds like Quincy Jones demand a new level of recognition. These cultural producers get authorship credits, have their names above the title, or even own the company. It is not accidental that most of these figures are African American, because of the historical and structural primacy of racial slavery in constituting the U.S. social formation and its ideology, and the historically key role of African Americans in shaping the culture which now could completely subjugate them.

On the one side, the prominence of African Americans in the cultural sphere forces massses of white people, whose consciousness about race is contradictory and fragmented, to recognize that people of color produce culture, even some of the culture which white people like best and try to imitate. A white person can wear Air Jordans
and admire individual Blacks and that admiration is an opening for identifying with people of color and questioning their oppression. But lacking a coherent critique of racism, that white person might still be quite racist.

On the other side, since any overt political opposition by Black, Latino, Asian and Native peoples in the United States has been subject to such murderous repression by the state, their opposition gets pushed into—and sometimes contained by—a cultural form. Kinte cloth, dreadlocks and "40 Acres and a Mule" warmup jackets don't constitute a program for liberation, but they are a less dangerous way for a Black person to assert collective identity and pride than joining an overtly political, radical group.

If you're still wondering what's the point of reexamining history and social theories (including our own left wing ones) once we appreciate for diversity, a coherent story of human evolution and a moral philosophy of history that enables us to situate ourselves as responsible global actors?

SAMIR AMIN AND THE CRITIQUE OF EUROCENTRIC MARXIST THEORY

We'll start with Samir Amin, the Egyptian economic historian, both because his conceptual framework encompasses the greatest historical reach, and because his project is to help construct a genuine historical materialist theory of social evolution by eliminating Eurocentric bias. He believes that "all human societies have gone through and will go through stages that, despite their diversity of form, are basically similar. The problem is to correctly identify these stages, on the basis of human history as a whole." Therefore, in its more subtle form, eurocentrism acknowledges contributions from non-European cultures but says that if they're important enough, they'll be subsumed within the Western legacy.

acknowledge that Europeans didn't invent everything good, well, there are several reasons. Our theory of imperialism certainly needs to develop its cultural dimension to better understand the ideological framework that legitimizes white supremacy. Further, if we want to create a world where no nation or region dominates another, it would help to understand how this domination arose and is perpetuated. If Europe didn't subdue the world just because it was culturally superior and rational as we learned in school, then why did it? How can we explain why cultures and economic systems which had many valuable features were destroyed? What can we learn from non-European cultures that can help us conceptualize and bring into being a truly egalitarian society? As educators and parents, how do we provide children of all backgrounds with an authentic (non-superior) pride in their own people, an appreciation for diversity, a coherent story of human evolution and a moral philosophy of history that enables us to situate ourselves as responsible global actors?

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In Class and Nation: Historically and in the Current Crisis and Eurocentrism, he challenges not only bourgeois history but also Marxist explanations of the succession of modes of production. In Class and Nation, he challenges a schema propagated in countless Marxist study groups—that there are four stages of history, or four modes of production: primitive communism/barbarism, ancient slavery, feudalism and capitalism. China and India have been considered weird forms of feudalism because they were less fragmented, and thus not dominated by the ideological framework. Further, he points out that the surplus product exists may be centralized by a ruling group for collective use and redistributed according to the needs of reproduction, but it is not yet appropriated by a consolidated group for its own use, and there is not yet a state.

Amin offers the concept of the tribal mode to cover pre-capitalist societies with developed states and ruling classes: ancient Egypt, classical Greece and Rome, Medieval Europe and the Incas and Mayas in America and dynastic China. The term "tribal" comes from the fact that the surplus product is a commodity transformed in the form of tribute, not through economic exchange as in the capitalist marketplace. Production is essentially based on use-value, not exchange-value, and thus the product extracted by the exploiting class is a direct use-value for this class, which wants the actual product, the grain or cloth, they don't just want it to sell. There is some commodity production (and where there's slavery, fairly widespread commodity production), but it is not universal, and labor power is not yet a commodity as it is under capitalism.

Since tribute cannot be extracted over an extended period solely by means of violence, the superstructure dominates in tribal societies. Usually a state or quasi-state religion legitimizes the exploitation and shapes up social consensus. (Much of Part I of Eurocentrism is a detailed study of tribal ideology in different societies.) The final characteristic of this mode is that it appears to be stable or even stagnant, because there is no necessary internal drive to accumulate the law of value eventually. Capitalist production is now up the superstructure. But in the case of significant development of the productive forces did occur in tribal societies. And so did class struggle.

With his thesis of unequal development, Amin then proceeds to turn the usual explanation of why capitalism emerged in Europe
on its head. He puts forth, as a general tendency of social evolution on the most abstract level, that it is the society which is peripheral, less developed (i.e. has a lower productivity of labor) in a given mode of production which will go on to lead the way into the subsequent mode of production. Why? Because the advanced society is advantageously positioned, highly structured and inflexible, while the less advanced experiences the disadvantages and contradictions of the current mode more strongly, and is more flexible. Therefore, capitalism developed in Europe because European feudalism was a backward, peripheral form of the tributary mode: with political/territorial fragmentation, less unified ideology, and lower labor productivity.

**WHY DID CAPITALISM FIRST ARISE IN EUROPE?**

*HINT: Not Because Europeans Were Eternally Culturally Superior*

While emphasizing that history moves in accordance with knowable laws, Samir Amin has us to remind us that:

*Each mode of production is characterized by its own contradictions and thus by its own specific laws of motion... There are no laws of transition.* Each transition involves the working out of a historical necessity...through the concrete interaction of numerous specific contradictions within a social formation...

*(Close and Nation, p. 86-87)*

In examining the rise of European hegemony, Janet Abu-Lughod emphasizes the role of individual, accidental events, the limits of predictability, and the arbitrariness of how we pose questions about history and, attempt to answer them. Working from a world systems theory perspective in Before Europe's Hegemony, she writes eloquently and clearly, constantly posing in everyday language key methodological questions. She reminds us that there's no way to stand outside some context when you look at history, and therefore you need to triangulate. If the historian searches for the testimony of the people at the bottom, not only the victors, and compares many different versions of a historical event, some valid knowledge can emerge. Because we're always constructing history backwards—from our concerns of today—we have to consciously decide where to start our inquiry in order to answer accurately the questions which we pose.

For example, most research on the rise of capitalism begins looking around the year 1400, when European hegemony is a predictable outcome. But 1250 to 1350 was a period of commercial revolution, and looking around in the year 1300, one would have predicted the continuation of the Indian Ocean/China trade network. Why did it fail? Why don't we ask why the previous trade nexus fell apart? (Much of her book meticulously documents the 8 regional overlapping sub-systems that approached being a partial world system in this period; no true world system existed before the rise of capitalism.) And isn't it interesting, she notes, that we ask why the European half of the Roman Empire fell, and attribute it to external reasons (barbarian invasions), and why capitalism arose in Europe, and attribute it to internal reasons (superior culture, greater dynamism).

For Abu-Lughod, combinations of relatively accidental features in context determine an outcome, but not one which is necessarily predictable in advance. In the 11th and 12th century, China produced iron and steel by coal-powered techniques, had compass navigation, cannons and gunpowder. The medieval Mideast made better textiles than Europe, which imported their finished goods. Checks, investment partnerships, credit, double-entry bookkeeping were invented in 5th and 6th century Persia, long before they emerged in Italy. Government-issued paper currency appeared in 12th century Sung China. Viking sailors reached the Americas without restructing Europe-Asia-Africa. Arab sailors sailed around Africa without making the Atlantic the core of world commerce. None of these productive and commercial advances led directly to capitalism.

Abu-Lughod believes that the crucial determinants in making Europe the center of global capitalist development and of the first truly global world system were not any institutional or motivational characteristics of European culture. Rather, a combination of geopolitical factors in other regions created the opportunity for Europe's rise, in synchronization with Europe's navigational mastery of the Atlantic and conquest of the Americas. These factors included the disintegration of prior trade routes to the East. For example, as the Pax Mongolica succumbed to renewed fighting after 1250, the roads connecting the Central Asia land route with the South China seaports no longer offered safe passage. Tamerlane's conquests of Arab Asia and the end of the Crusader state at Acre blocked the European-Persian Gulf link. The Black Death decimated populations from Central Asia to the Mediterranean, creating labor shortages and declines in production, while England and Northern Europe were less hard hit.

Together, all these events weakened previous regional power centers and trading networks. Europe's fulfillment of its long quest for a circuitous route to the East enabled it to appropriate numerous inventions and techniques, and take advantage of and accelerate the decline of other powers. The former Mideastern, Asian and African trading centers were accustomed to multiple trading partners who wanted long-term trade. The conquest of the Americas unleashed a new European approach of plundering trade which startled and completely overwhelmed these already declining centers.

The first volume of Martin Bernal's Black Athena, The Afro-Asiatic Roots of Classical Civilization, has two main themes. First, Bernal (the son of Marxist scientist J.D. Bernal and a Sinologist by training) encyclopedically summarizes evidence of Greek cultural borrowings from Egypt, primarily during the period between 2100 and 1100 B.C., by comparing artifacts, building remains, mythology, and manuscripts on math and the sciences. (A separate volume will cover the similarities in language; Bernal estimates that 40% of Greek words have Egyptian roots.) At the same time, he offers a "sociology of knowledge," tracing the evolution of European attitudes about and portrayals (or mis-portrayals) of these cultural borrowings, from the Medieval period through the present.

**THE RISE OF CAPITALISM AND EUROCENTRIC IDEOLOGY**

For progressives seeking to understand white supremacist ideology, the most striking point is that up until the early 1800s, Europeans generally respected Egyptian civilization and acknowledged its formative influence on Greece. Bernal exhaustively confirms for European intellectual history a hypothesis which Black liberation fighters and some socialists (like Lerone Bennett and Ted Allen) have long postulated for U.S. history: It was only after Europeans enslaved and exploited Africans that the notion of separate races emerged with the inseparable corollary that those races had unequal intellectual and moral capacities.
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Bernal demonstrates in detail that, on the contrary, there were no new excavations, word decipherings, discoveries of texts or any other kinds of evidence undermining the Ancient Model during the period when it was discarded. While avoiding mechanical conspiracy theories, he suggests convincingly that ideas or theories change due to the discovery of new evidence internal to a given field of study, not due to external social factors.

EUROCENTRISM AND THE REPRODUCTION OF CAPITALISM

Samar Amin has continued to develop the pathbreaking insight associated with dependency theory, which, since the 60s, has influenced most Third World economists in and beyond Marxian circles. This thesis was aptly summarized by the assassinated Guinean revolutionary Walter Rodney in his title of his book, How Europe Underdeveloped Africa. Within this framework, Amin has also continued to elaborate a specifically Marxist and Leninist theory of imperialism. Amin takes apart the notions that western canalled "underdeveloped world" is underdeveloped because of internal cultural factors or because of a delay; and that it will "catch up" economically and adopt the democratic forms which the market unflinchingly brings.

Amin goes further, denying that the Western model of capitalism can be generalized to the entire planet. He seconds the ecology activists' insight—that if all the world's peoples consumed Euro-North American style commodities at U.S. levels, the result would be incalculable environmental damage, probably irreversible. (On a human, if not a geological, time scale). In looking at how capitalism reproduces itself, Amin's fundamental point is that center-periphery polarization has historically been, and continues to be, essential to and inherent in the system. Through its history, capitalism has produced prosperous regions or nations (allowing an increased standard of living even for the working masses) at the expense of other regions or nations. What's the center and what's the periphery can, in principle, change to some extent, but the polarization is structural. Surplus value is transferred from the peripheries to the center, making a democratic consensus under (white supremacist) bourgeois hegemony possible there. The fact that capitalism originated in Europe and subordinated the rest of the globe also means that a critique of European culture is a necessary aspect of the national liberation struggle and the transition to socialism.

Holding on to these deeper realities can help us at a time when common sense seems to proclaim that markets generate increased living standards for workers and democracy in government, and that planning is transferred from the peripheries to the center and what's the periphery can, in principle, change to some extent, but the polarization is structural. Surplus value is transferred from the peripheries to the center, making a democratic consensus under (white supremacist) bourgeois hegemony possible there. The fact that capitalism originated in Europe and subordinated the rest of the globe also means that a critique of European culture is a necessary aspect of the national liberation struggle and the transition to socialism.

In evaluating the effect on Marx and Engels of working within the Eurocentric framework they shared with the European intelligentsia of their time, the booklet emphasizes that they condemned Europe's brutal crimes against the peoples of the colonial world. But Marx and Engels tended to focus their analysis on what they felt were the positive effects of colonialism; they saw it as breaking up economically and socially stagnant societies and paving the way for industrial development and progress, the preconditions for social emancipation.

The RCLB authors show that this view is flawed on three grounds. First, these societies, while not driven by the competition of capitals to produce cheaper commodities and seize a larger market share, were not stagnant or without increases in labor productivity. It is, in fact, capitalism which produces stagnation in the Third World. Even capitalism's first impact outside Europe often involved the neglect of indigenous public works systems, the substitution of one-crop production for agricultural diversity and the destruction of crafts which could compete with European production, like Indian textiles. Thirdly, non-European societies were not socially stagnant, but rather were
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inconsistent and though survival dictated an early Soviet focus on Europe, Lenin did in fact identify the struggle of oppressed nations against imperialism as the main form in which socialist revolution would develop.

In its treatment of the Comintern period, Eurocentrism and the Communist Movement highlights the arguments of a number of controversial or neglected figures like M.N. Roy, Sultan Gaiiev, Li Dazhao and Lamine Sanghor. On the other hand, the RCLB authors express the subjugation and damaging hold that Eurocentric thinking retained within the international communist movement. One of their sharpest examples is a biting critique of A. Leonidov's book Political Economy, which was the basic text in countless study groups where many U.S. radicals first grappled with Marxist-Leninist theory. (Even the section rehashing the positions of various small organizations within the British Maoist movement revolutionaries tend to smash what is oppressive in the traditional system and, in the national struggle, to accentuate the communal and constructive aspects of traditional society: mutual aid networks, farming practices that preserve soil, systems of educating the youth and so on.

In terms of program and strategy, Amin and the British authors focus primarily on the countries of the Third World. But what they say is also crucial for our anticolonialist practice, our vision of socialism and our struggle against domestic white supremacy and eurocentrism. Amin sees the path of emancipation turning away from the false universality of capitalist eurocentrism through the affirmation of popular national development to the recomposition of a genuine socialist universalism. He believes that real national and popular development can only be founded on a worker-peasant al-

liance delinked from the world system; and that Maoism's contribution was to understand this as the enduring strategic condition for the transition to socialism in the age of imperialism.

By "delinking," Amin does not mean autarchy, sealing off borders or a Khmer Rouge-style program. He means an internally directed development, determined by democratically set priorities for diversified production of use-values to meet domestic needs. In other words, world market prices and financing arrangements should not be the determining factor. Delinking also involves safeguarding and using advantageously a nation's particular non-renewable resources and combining indigenous traditional technologies and crafts with a conscious, selective adoption of Western capitalist techniques. It does not idealize either traditional culture and technique or capitalist culture and technique; it is not fundamentalist in any way. In Amin's apt words:

"Without a truly universalist perspective founded on the critique of economics and enriched by the contributions of all peoples, the struggle against the eurocentrism of some and the inverted eurocentrism of others will continue, in an atmosphere of destructive fanaticism."

Amin's strategic recommendations are complex, because delinking requires both some (state) barriers against market hegemony—therby restricting both investment and popular consumption—and genuine worker-peasant democracy. While he does not necessarily idealize Western parliamentarianism, he does envision democracy as something other than: "The workers and peasants must want this, because the Party wants it and the Party represents their interests." His writings on China (The Future of Maoism and others) assess post-revolutionary develop-

ment until the 1980s as progressive overall in that worker/manager, city/country and other differentials narrowed. But he has not extensively covered more recent developments. Amin acknowledges that the popular democratic path guarantees the overcoming of neither capitalism nor eurocentrism, but unlike the two alternatives—the capitalist or the Soviet-style statist path—it at least makes such an overcoming possible.

CONCLUSION

It is important to see eurocentrism as an intricate and pervasive system of ideas and values, and to see that this system has enormous consequences in the real world. Eurocentrism is the belief that Christopher Columbus "discovered" the Western Hemisphere. Eurocentrism is also the fact that the United States, with 5 percent of the planet's population, continues to consume 25 percent of its natural resources.

Thus, an understanding of and relentless assault on eurocentrism is an essential component of any revolutionary activity worthy of the name. In this spirit we would like to propose four points of orientation to strengthen this component of the struggle.

First, the critique of eurocentrism must be continued as a long-term, ongoing task. The contributions of the authors cited here, all made within the last few years, have by no means completed the task. We who are not scholars or theoreticians cannot discharge this obligation merely by reading these books (or having a general idea of what they're about). At minimum we must grapple with the issues they raise. Is Amin right in dismissing the traditional M-L schema of societal evolution? Is the RCLB too harsh on Marx and Engels and the Comintern?
Does it really make any important difference for us if Abu-Lughod and Bernal are right in their reinterpretation of events which took place centuries and millennia ago?

Second, Marx's point about replacing the weapon of criticism with criticism by weapons has relevance here. For most of us, the greatest contribution to developing the critique of eurocentrism will be made in the course of struggle. This is easiest to see in the instance of the growing opposition to the Columbus Quincentennial, which has a dual character—as a spontaneous movement of the broad left and as a significant offensive in the ongoing ideological battle over what values will predominate in this country. It emphasizes the importance of work in solidarity with struggles in the Third World and in opposition to the crimes of the United States and rival imperialisms there. Eurocentrism will increasingly provide the ideological cover for racist responses to the growing size and influence of populations of color in the United States, as exemplified by the "English only" movement.

Third, where there is oppression, there is resistance. The critique of eurocentrism develops spontaneously from within many social movements. Afrocentricty is under relentless attack, not because of the one-sidedness of some proponents, but because it is a systematic response to and critique of eurocentrism, produced by the Black liberation struggle. It has the important effects of showing that eurocentrism is not the natural order of things but merely one way—a hideously flawed and inadequate way—of looking at the world. It also shows that the oppressed and excluded can create their own framework of self-definition. Similarly, the growth of multiculturalism as an opposition current within education, both in the academy and in elementary and high schools, threatens the hegemony of eurocentrism in these institutions, so crucial in the formation of the world outlook of this country's citizens. At the same time, the vagueness of multiculturalism as a concept leaves it open to cooptation, to the idea that part of the superiority of "Western civilization" is its ability to take in the "best elements" of other societies and make them its own.

Another movement contributing elements to the critique of eurocentrism is ecology activism. Many Greens and others feel a strong affinity for the Native American peoples, which gives them a foot outside the Eurocentric framework. Particularly significant is their opposition to the enormously destructive fetishism of production and consumption which are part and parcel of the Eurocentric framework and held up by its defenders as proof of the system's superiority. At the same time, this current sometimes goes overboard—into an idealization of precapitalist societies and their supposed harmony with nature. (Actually, some preserved their surroundings, in relative terms, while others destroyed resources and even the habitability of geographical areas; and as for harmony, it is a human value, not a process in nature). We need to avoid the pitfalls of glorifying either capitalist progress and dynamism or precapitalist harmony. The challenge will be to synthesize a viable program for liberation that respects both popular desires and ecological limits.

Fourth, the critique of eurocentrism is an indispensable part of developing and articulating a new socialist vision, exactly because, as we are coming to understand, eurocentrism is such a linchpin of imperialist global domination. The development of a genuine socialist universalism will have other sources and component parts as well—Marxism and the summed up experience of efforts so far to build socialist societies, the critique of patriarchy and the contributions of feminist and womanist theory. There are more, and the different elements are connected. Indeed, the job of developing a new socialist vision is in no small part the job of understanding the complexity of the oppressive system we live under and the necessary links between the various ideological challenges raised by people's struggle against that system.

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by Samir Amin


**Class and Nation: Historically and in the Current Crisis**

by Janet Abu-Lughod


**De/inking**

by Samir Amin


**Before Europe's Hegemony**

by Martin Bernal

(New Brunswick, Rutgers University Press, 1987)

**Eurocentrism and the Communist Movement**

by Janet Abu-Lughod

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**Revolutionary Communism**

by the Revolutionary Communist League of Britain


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