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Samir Amin and the challenges of socialist transformation in senile capitalism

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ABSTRACT

This article intends to point out strategic dimensions of the thought of Samir Amin. It highlights his analysis of capitalism, of the world system in which it is articulated, and of ways to overcome them in the twenty-first century. He also approaches his reflections on the construction of a V international and his criticisms of those that preceded it.

KEYWORDS

Samir Amin; senile capitalism; socialism; World System; Fifth International; imperialism

Samir Amin, a leading scholar and co-founder of the world-systems tradition, died on August 12, 2018. Just before his death, he published, along with close allies, a call for ‘workers and the people’ to establish a ‘fifth international’ [<https://www.pambazuka.org/global-south/letter-intent-inaugural-meeting-international-workers-and-peoples>] to coordinate support to progressive movements. To honor Samir Amin’s invaluable contribution to world-systems scholarship, we are pleased to present readers with a selection of essays responding to Amin’s final message for today’s anti-systemic movements. This forum is being co-published between Globalizations [<https://www.tandfonline.com/rglo>], the Journal of World-Systems Research [<http://jwsr.pitt.edu/ojs/index.php/jwsr/issue/view/75>] and Pambazuka News [<https://www.pambazuka.org/>]. Additional essays and commentary can be found in these outlets.

Samir Amin’s reflections on the importance of the creation of a Fifth International, gathered principally in his article, *Pour la Cinquième Internationale*, published first in 2006, reveal the vitality of his thought manifested along several driving axes. Among them, we can point to the analysis of the long-term trends of capitalist globalization, particularly in the form it assumes in its neoliberal stage; the anti-systemic movements that are constituted to resist its expansion or to defeat and overcome it; the potentialities, limits and failures of the earlier Internationals; and the projects that are oriented toward the transition to socialism in the twenty-first century in short, medium and long-term perspective.

Amin points out that capitalism constitutes a polarizing world system whose central contradiction, capital versus labour, is cross-cut by other contradictions that act in a distinct direction – the main ones being imperialism versus the self-determination of peoples and the sovereignty of national states. These contradictions fragment the unity of workers in their struggles with capital. Other contradictions also include the growing division of labour, which drives the heterogeneity

of workers within and between national states, acting to reinforce the fragmentation of the workers. The success of capital in the fight against workers is specifically articulated in the forms of geospatial specialization and dispersion of labour, but this advantage is not linear, progressive or definitive. It presents itself, cyclically, subject to the political and social actions of the workers who, through the national and international articulations of their class struggles guided by their material, subjective and civilizing interests, can partially restrain or destroy it by means of combined rebellions, reforms and revolutions.

As the senility of the capitalist world-system advances, the spaces for intervention of the struggles of labour against capital expand. Senility is linked to a double condition: the combination of the advance of monopolization and centralization of capital; and the growing loss of its political and ideological hegemony to lead globalization and national interests, which becomes a project of domination. The workers Internationals were attempts to respond to the globalization of capital. Though partial victories were achieved and to some extent imposed the political economy of labour on the bourgeoisie, were neutralized, absorbed and defeated by the restructuring of capitalism and its world power arrangements.

According to Amin, the main reason for the polarization in the capitalist world-system is that of the contradiction between the law of value that operates on a national scale and that, which operates on a world scale. While the first law of value refers to the purest and most abstract forms of the capitalist mode of production by competitively integrating the circulation of capital and commodities and labour power, the second refers to the concrete forms in which it operates in the world space, where it restricts the circulation of workforces. This contradiction between political and economic forces is inherent in capitalism, which cannot function without the existence of capitalist states, resulting in the concrete polarization of the mode of production in centres and peripheries on a world scale. Amin established these theses in his publications in the 1970s, such as the *Accumulation à la échelle mondiale* (1970), *l'échange inégal et la loi de la valeur* (1973), and they are developed in more recent works devoted to the analysis of neoliberal globalization as *Les défis de la mondialisation* (1996) and *Obscurescent capitalism* (2003).

For Amin one can only speak of a capitalist world system since the 1800s, despite its mercantilist precedents from 1500, when the specific basis of its productive forces in the centre was established. This happened with the industrial revolution, the proletarianization of the labour force and the beginning of the construction of a new international division of labour on a world scale that was driven by European imperialism and the British hegemony during the nineteenth century. Amin contends that the thesis of Immanuel Wallerstein and Giovanni Arrighi, (inspired by Fernand Braudel) which posits the existence of a *Modern world system and Historical capitalism* from the sixteenth century onwards, is dissociated from the concept of mode of production, dehydrating it too much. Amin seeks to articulate the concept of mode of production for analysing the world system, conceiving these as two articulated and contradictory levels of the construction of existing capitalism.

The polarization of the capitalist world in the centre and periphery leads to distinct monopolistic structures and divisions of labour in the functioning of the development of productive forces and the internationalization of class struggles. Initially, the form of the division of labour in the capitalist world economy was to allocate industrial production to the centres, and agricultural products and raw materials to the peripheries. However, the Russian, Chinese and Mexican revolutions, the resurgence of protectionism in the world economy and policies of import substitution in Latin America, the decolonization of the European colonial empires in Africa and Asia, and the rise of the United States established important changes between the years 1930 and 1980. Industrialist projects in the USSR and China were juxtaposed with the industrialization projects of some peripheral bourgeoisies

which, even within the framework of dependence, reached a certain degree of national autonomy. From the 1980s onward, however, the neoliberal offensive, the collapse of the USSR and the imposition of the Washington Consensus on Latin America, Africa and Eastern Europe dismantled much of this autonomy and reoriented the industrial bourgeoisies of the peripheral countries toward the position of bourgeoisie buyers. These turned to primary-export activities or to the generation of parts and components, as well as extractive mining, land speculation or usurious income through public debt. Amin asserted, however, that socialist China could sustain its autonomy and challenge the prominence of American Atlanticism because of the depth of reforms implemented during the Maoist period, which defined land ownership as public.

The neoliberal globalization project established a period of senile capitalism centred on five monopolies: new technologies, the monetary standard and international financial flows, access to the planet's natural resources, the media and weapons of mass destruction. However, its obsolete character reveals itself in several dimensions: in the plutocracy that directs it and uses money to transform democracy in low-intensity democracy based on consensus about private property, deepening inequality and imposing limits on emancipations; in the destruction of peasant property and the planetary ecosystem, which threaten the survival of humanity and produce the unlimited conversion of labour, land and the biomes into commodities; and in the decline of the American and European imperialisms, which produces risks of military conflicts. Confronting this senile neoliberal capitalism requires a new internationalism that articulates action around social progress, democratization and the construction of a multi-centred world system.

In his review of the earlier Internationals Amin emphasizes that the Fifth International must rescue from the First its critical spirit and its diversity of visions. He points out that democracy must demand the right to move toward socialization through innovation, subversion and rupture with the sacredness of private property. The Fifth International must reject the theses, which, since the Second International, have claimed a party monopoly of theory over the social movements and the masses. Socialism must be seen as a set of long, medium and short-term transitions in which both theory and practice articulate with each other to produce gradual convergences. The Fifth International should encompass a broad spectrum of social forces representing political parties and social movements that are acting against capitalism, imperialism and inequality and for the emancipation of human beings from the oppressions of gender, ethnic-racial and sexual orientations. But in order to do so, it will be necessary to overcome the limited social base achieved by the previous Internationals. The First represented only segments of the European industrial male proletariat; the Second, their political parties; the Third, the direction of the national liberation movements; the Fourth, the small avant-garde groups.

To achieve this broad spectrum of mobilization, Amin argues that the Fifth International must have its axis of gravity around the establishment of the international centre-left, capable of gathering around them revolutionaries and reformists who not only struggle against neoliberalism, but for democratic and social advances, for a multipolar world and for the ecological management of the planet. He sees in the World Social Forums a beginning of this articulation, from which neoliberal and imperialist forces should be eliminated. He points out that there is no reason to suppose that the reformist movements will not learn from their mistakes, even though he acknowledges that some of them probably never will. What favours this optimistic perspective is the extension of the victims of the centralization and monopolization of capital that reaches large populations of the core countries, reducing the asymmetry between the victims of imperialism and capitalism. This asymmetry constituted the social basis for the working classes and their political organizations and trade unions to support the imperialism from which they benefited through the international redistribution of

surplus value. Such a scenario could lead the progressive forces of social democracy and the identity movements in the core countries to escape being captured by the logic of imperialism and capitalism. For the national liberation movements of the Global South, which would form an important part of the Fifth International, the fundamental challenge is to deepen its link with democracy and the socialization of power, articulating them with the anti-imperialist, decolonial and anti-capitalist struggles.

The articulated action of the world left is fundamental for combatting the rise of forces to the right of neoliberal globalization, which seek to compensate for the destructive effects of monopolization and centralization of capital, supporting the deepening of imperialist logic. Amin points out that the contradictions of the neoliberal globalization project are linked to the rise of neofascism. Neofascists intend to use the power of the state to monopolize privileges and to destroy the competitive pressures arising from the emergence of new poles of economic power, migratory flows of workers, and democratic and emancipatory demands in the context of senile capitalism and the decline of American hegemony. Neofascism is linked to religious, social, ethnic and tribal dimensions that prioritize cultural battles and intolerance of diversity, neglecting the economic battles and conflicting material interests in the capitalist world system. As such, they serve not only the decadent sectors of the northwestern Atlantic power centres, but also the buyer bourgeoisie of the periphery that seeks to monopolize political power and increase its ability to mediate access to assets, natural resources, sources of energy and labour. Very dangerous are the American right sheltered in the Republican Party, and the jihadist currents of Islam.

Amin contends that the central struggle in the capitalist world system in the twenty-first century is the struggle between socialism and capitalism. It develops within each State according to its specificities, partly determined by its place in the hierarchies of the international division of labour. In this sense, the simple ascent of China and East Asia in opposition to Atlantic imperialism does not guarantee a transition to socialism, because the Chinese state is permeated, albeit in its own way, by the same conflict that develops in the world system. The overall transition to socialism, if established, will be the result of a broad set of social and political forces that will be articulated at several levels – micropolitical, local, national, world regional. and global. The socialist project is a planetary civilizational project manifested in multiple dimensions: economic, political, social, cultural and environmental. Its construction involves the contradictory and dialectical combination of struggles for political power and for culture, which must preserve their relative autonomy. It should be founded on solidarity, limiting competition, replacing competitive advantages with cooperative advantages for the establishment of a multicentered system based on peace, negotiation and law.

Samir Amin leaves us a vast and consistent body of thought for meeting the challenges of the twenty-first century. He developed Marxist categories to formulate an analysis of real capitalism, as it exists, in the world-system it engendered. We can disagree with several of its aspects, such as the role it confers on the global mobility of the workforce in determining international value transfers and world polarization, the absence of the concept of scientific-technical revolution to analyse the senility of contemporary capitalism, or their refusal to extend the concept of the capitalist world-system until the fifteenth or sixteenth century, as Wallerstein and Arrighi do (Martins, 2011).

Notwithstanding, he gives us a set of valuable interpretations and questions of great theoretical and analytical importance for the task of transforming the contemporary world towards human emancipation.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

Carlos Eduardo Martins has a degree in Sociology and Politics from the Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro (1990), a Master's degree in Business Administration from Getúlio Vargas Foundation (1996) and a PhD in Sociology from the University of São Paulo (2003). Associate Professor at the Institute of International Relations and Defense (IRID/UFRJ), Professor of the Permanent Framework of the Post-Graduation Program in International Political Economy (PEPI/UFRJ), Coordinator of the Laboratory of Studies on Hegemony and Counter-hegemony (LEHC / UFRJ), Researcher of CLACSO WGs (the Regional Integration and United States).

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