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On Samir Amin's call for a Fifth International

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ABSTRACT

In his prodigious output, from works on capitalist development to analyses of Islamist movements to involvement in the World Social Forum, Samir Amin's was a consistent voice for struggle against capitalism's domination of the world and its peoples. In this brief essay I address his call for a shift from *movement* to *organization*, indeed, toward a kind of Fifth International and explain why I endorse it.

KEYWORDS

Samir Amin; Fifth International; World Social Forum; right-wing populism

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.

A Marxist, development economist, and internationalist who was born in Cairo to an Egyptian father and French mother and who spent much of his life on the African continent writing, speaking, and strategizing, Samir Amin was truly one of a kind. I came to know his work while in the Iranian student movement in the late 1970s and then as a graduate student in the early 1980s, as his writings on dependency, imperialism, and 'delinking' resonated deeply with students, activists, and scholars from the 'Third World'. I first met him when I attended two of the 'Cavtat Roundtables' in the late 1980s – those unique meetings organized by the Yugoslav Communist Party that brought together socialists, left social democrats, Communists, and independent leftists from across the globe. In 1986, Amin presented a paper at the Cavtat Roundtable entitled 'Culture and Development: Reflections on Arab-Islamic Thought'. He told me at the time that the paper was his contribution to an ongoing debate among Arab intellectuals around epistemological issues related to development and change, and the extent to which 'the West' and its conceptual systems were responsible for the Arab world's cultural and economic stagnation. That paper led to his book, *Eurocentrism*, which inspired a review essay I wrote for the journal *Socialism and Democracy* (Moghadam, 1989).

In his prodigious output, from works on capitalist development to analyses of Islamist movements to involvement in the World Social Forum, Amin's was a consistent voice for struggle against capitalism's domination of the world and its peoples, and in this he was unwavering to the end. In this brief essay I address his call for a shift from *Movement* to *Organization*, indeed, toward a kind of Fifth International (Amin, 2018a) and explain why I endorse it.

The global justice movement and the World Social Forum

The 1990s saw both the consolidation of neoliberal capitalist globalization and its opposite, the making of a global justice movement, which was propelled onto the world stage through the now-famous Battle of Seattle. In the new century the World Social Forum (WSF) was launched, the brainchild of the Brazilian Workers' Party and representatives of social movements and left-wing initiatives from several countries. The first WSF was held in Porto Alegre in 2001 and about every two years since then, convening also in Mumbai, Caracas, Nairobi, Tunis, and Montreal. It is worth noting that the charter of the WSF expressly forbids the formulation of a political program or even working with progressive political parties, and 'a significant group of participants strongly supports maintaining the WSF as an "open space" for debate and organizing' (Chase-Dunn & Nagy, 2018, p. 264). Articles 1 and 5 of the June 2001 WSF Charter of Principles state the following:

The WSF is an open meeting place for reflective thinking, democratic debate of ideas, formulation of proposals, free exchange of experiences and interlinking for effective action, by groups and movements of civil society ... The WSF bring together and interlinks only organizations and movements of civil society from all the countries of the world.

By mid-decade, some participants felt that the time had come for the WSF to shift from a forum for deliberative dialogue to a site for political strategizing. In 2005, Samir Amin was a member of the 'Group of Nineteen', WSF participants who penned the Porto Alegre Manifesto outlining 12 proposals on economic measures, peace and justice, and democracy, 'to give sense and direction to the construction of another, different world'.¹ In summary form, the proposals called for cancellation of debts of developing countries; implementation of the Tobin Tax on speculative capital and similar taxes on international financial transactions; dismantling offshore banking ('fiscal, juridical, and banking paradises'); codifying rights to employment, social security, and the equality of women and men; promoting equitable trade and the protection of cultural heritage; establishing a country's right to agricultural and food sovereignty; banning patents on knowledge pertaining to living beings as well as the privatization of the commons; public policies banning discrimination, sexism, racism, xenophobia, and antisemitism; ending the destruction of the environment; dismantling all foreign military bases; the right of free access to information and support for non-profit media; and the reform and democratization of international institutions.

In 2004, Susan George of the Transnational Institute (and a veteran of the anti-Vietnam war movement) had already penned a call to 'take the movement forward' with a focus on power and a more concerted political agenda.² In a 2007 posting, Walden Bello – Filipino sociologist, veteran activist and public figure, executive director of Focus on the Global South, and another manifesto signatory – wondered whether the WSF had run its course and should now 'give way to new modes of global organization and resistance and transformation'.³ In the face of continued 'horizontalism' of the global justice movement and of the WSF itself, others asked if the movement had the capacity to counter power in its neoliberal, capitalist, or imperialist guises.

A recent two-part book on the global justice movement, *The Movements of Movements* (Sen, 2017, 2018) is composed of essays largely in favor of continued discussion, diversity, direct democracy, and prefigurative action ('horizontalism') but it does include a number of contributions in favor of a more strategic approach. Most of the essays were written in the period 2004–08 and reprinted for the two volumes. In 'The Strategic Implications of Anti-Statism in the Global Justice Movement', Stephanie Ross (2018) criticizes the 'romanticized view of civil society as a realm of freedom and autonomy' and 'rejection of the possibility that state power can be used by progressive forces to create alternatives to capitalism' (p. 201). She concludes: 'While convincing people that "another world is possible" is key, how much more demoralizing is to see that belief unsupported by material changes in relations of power and wealth?' (p. 216). Writing on neoliberalism in Latin America, Emir Sader (2017) is critical of the emphasis on 'the social' at the expense of 'the political', and the way the WSF took up this stance to keep the forum exclusive to 'civil society' and social movements while closed to political parties. He points out that despite the crisis of Mexico's ruling PRI, the Zapatistas chose to remain outside electoral politics and even scorned the left-wing candidate, Andres-Manuel Lopez Obrador (AMLO), in the 2006 elections that were won by the right-wing party (see pp. 504–505). In his call for a return to strategy, the late Daniel Bensaid (2017) argues that 'we need now to be specific about what the other "possible" world is and – above all – to explore how to get there' (p. 518). He mentions two scenarios based on earlier uprisings: an insurrectional general strike and extended popular war.

The contribution by Samir Amin is especially striking. He asks: Who will challenge the new imperialist order, and how? He criticizes those who 'wish to maintain the WSF in a state of maximal impotence' (Amin, 2018b, p. 481). He then takes a look back at the First, Second, and Third Internationals (he mentions in passing the Fourth, or Trotskyist, International), and concludes that it is time to move towards a 'Fifth International'.

Right-wing populism and the New Global Left

The global justice movement was a proactive response to neoliberal capitalist globalization, and the World Social Forum was meant as the progressive answer to the World Economic Forum of businessmen and politicians (see Mertes, 2004). But the movement seemed paralyzed by the 9/11 tragedies and unable to confront the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan soon afterwards. It is worth noting that the United States maintains a military presence there, in what is now its longest war. Nor has Afghanistan regained peace and security, since the United States cast its lot with a tribal-Islamist uprising against a modernizing left-wing government, a move that triggered the government's appeal to the Soviet Union for military assistance and then generated a long and bloody war and ultimately the brutal reign first of the Mujahidin and then the Taliban, prior to the U.S. invasion. Worse, the global justice movement could not prevent the 2003 U.S./U.K. invasion and occupation of Iraq, from which its people still have not recovered. Between 2002 and 2008, the 'Cairo Conferences' brought together an unlikely coalition of Arab leftists, nationalists, and Islamists appalled by the imperialist designs on Iraq, but that coalition failed in the face of state repression as well as its own internal contradictions (Abdelrahman, 2009). As the global economy became ever more neoliberal and reckless, the financial meltdown that occurred in 2007–08 was followed by the Great Recession. The events of 2011 – including the Arab Spring, Occupy Wall Street, and Europe's anti-austerity protests – seemed to augur a new era of challenges to the status quo. Instead, they were followed by more of the same in Europe and the United States, and the disastrous responses by Western powers and their Arab allies to protests in Libya, Syria, and Yemen.

The anarchist anthropologist David Graeber recently wrote that ‘we have won’ (Graeber, 2018), but I strongly disagree.

Mention should be made of progressive initiatives at the sub-national level, with cities as sites for participatory democracy and human rights application. Benjamin Barber (2014) argued that nation-states had become dysfunctional and that cities were doing a better job of tackling complex problems. Jackie Smith (2017) refers to ‘place-based efforts to realize human rights in localized settings’ and describes efforts in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania to realize ‘the right to the city’ on the part of low-paid workers and racial minorities. The so-called Cleveland model entails green and worker-owned co-operatives that were formed in response to economic distress; in Preston, a northern city in England that was hit by both de-industrialization and austerity, the Centre for Local Economic Strategies identified 12 large institutions anchored to the city – including the city and the county council, the university, the police and the hospital – to redirect the £1.2bn total annual spending power of these anchors to local businesses. In northern Syria, and in the midst of a brutal internationalized civil conflict with the intervention of legions of jihadists from around the world, a Kurdish community has created an experimental autonomous region, Rojava (Knapp, Flach, & Ayboga, 2016). Inspired by the writings of the American anarchist and social ecologist Murray Bookchin, their ideology centers around concepts of democratic confederalism, women’s liberation and participation, and the social economy. These are inspiring examples of progressive local initiatives. We know, however, that right-wing populists similarly call for local (as well as national) sovereignty, and the risk of reactionary and exclusionary localism is always present in such experiments. Spain’s Andalucia, for example, is now run by a right-wing populist party, Vox. Moreover, the famous Spanish social enterprise, Mondragon, based in the Basque region, remains successful but was hardly able to prevent Spain’s economic crisis and austerity policies after 2008. The record of the recent past, as well the rise and spread of right-wing populist movements, parties, and governments in Europe, the United States, and some Global South countries make the call for concerted political action and coordination more urgent. Such movements draw on the support of hardened right-wingers, to be sure, but also citizens who have been left behind by decades of neoliberal economic policy, austerity, and neglect (Hochschild, 2016; Judis, 2016; Rodrik, 2017; Schafer, 2017). Many of those citizens are also fearful of the economic and cultural effects of the massive wave of migrants and refugees – in turn the result of the failures of neoliberal economic policies, state destabilizations, and wars. Such citizens rightly blame the established parties for the migrant and refugee influx as well as the welfare cutbacks, and they trust that the new right-wing parties can turn the tide. Most such parties and governments are decidedly anti-feminist (Moghadam & Kaftan, 2019). Amin correctly notes that the emergence of right-wing populist movements in Europe reflects the failure of the European Union project.

Parallel to the rise of the Global Right are progressive alternatives such as Bernie Sanders’s *Our Revolution* in the United States, the British Labor Party under Corbyn, Spain’s Podemos, Portugal’s Left Bloc, the Front Populaire in Tunisia, and left-wing Green parties in many countries, including the USA. Could their membership and influence grow – as opposed to what happened to Greece’s Syriza? Could they build bridges and indeed coalitions with trade unions and feminist organizations to form a powerful alliance of transnational social movement organizations and progressive political parties that could challenge the powers-that-be? Indeed, in recent years, we have seen renewed calls for more concerted political action, coordination, and platforms. Christopher Chase-Dunn and his colleagues (2009, 2014, 2018) have examined prospects for *the World Revolution of 20xx* spearheaded by the *New Global Left* – those groups critical of neoliberal and capitalist globalization and which include popular forces, social movements, and progressive political parties and national

regimes. Heikki Patomäki (2018) has called for a World Political Party.⁴ The proposals in the 2005 Porto Alegre Manifesto align with the recent call for a *Progressive International*, an initiative of the (Bernie) Sanders Institute in Vermont, USA, and DiEM25, cofounded by the former Syriza finance minister Yannis Varoufakis.⁵ Could we be seeing movement toward the making of a united front? Could Samir Amin's call for a kind of Fifth International see the light of day?

There will be resistance, and not just on the part of the transnational capitalist class and its states. In a recent paper (Moghadam, 2018), I have suggested that the World Social Forum, if it changed its Charter of Principles, could become the site for strategic political planning and coordination, inasmuch as it remains the one forum at which such issues are discussed and where the varied progressive groups converge. But many WSF activists remain committed to its original intent. Jai Sen, editor of the huge two-volume book, *The Movements of Movements*, writes in the introduction to the first volume that the WSF has been a space 'where people in movement can gain the possibility of growing through their interactions, learning from their exchanges, and where the possibility also exists of new actors entering and joining the discussions' (Sader, 2017, p. 21). His preference is that 'there are many different movements taking place in our world today, and differing perceptions of justice, and many ways of moving, all of which we can learn from'; these include 'the student-led revolt in France in 1968, the Zapatista movement in Mexico since 1994, the "Battle of Seattle" in 1999, and ... what some call today "political Islam"' (Sader, 2017, p. 16). Sen seems to be offering a very expansive notion of 'justice movements', which may just as well include right-wing populist-nationalist movements. After all, like the political Islam that Sen seems to admire, they too have a sense of grievance and injustice – but one rather different from those who might be defined as the New Global Left.

My response to Sen is: Do we celebrate all struggles, or do we rank them, acknowledging that some may be divisive or violent or ideologically objectionable? Having missed recent opportunities to forge a sustained global movement against the ravages of neoliberal capitalist globalization and its many side effects, when is the time for strategic movement-building? Or do we have to settle for the many disparate and fragmented local struggles, some of them connected from time to time at the WSF, others making demands based on their own identities, and yet others morphing into right-wing populism? Surely such dispersion and division are precisely what reinforce the capitalist world-system. It's worth noting that many of the right-wing populist-nationalist parties and leaderships which have formed or won elections in recent years seem to be in some regular contact with each other, in part through that roving ambassador of the populist-nationalist Right, Steve Bannon. Similarly, the various Islamist parties and movements around the world, especially those of the Muslim Brotherhood variant, have ways of connecting and sharing. (Islamist parties belong squarely on the Right. As Samir Amin noted in his many critiques, Islamist movements are preoccupied with cultural issues rather than the improvement of people's socio-economic conditions and rights.)

Back to the future: toward a new internationalism

In a *Monthly Review* essay, 'Revolution from North to South', Amin (2017) provides a concise but comprehensive survey of political developments since the early 20th century and ends thus:

In conclusion, I will again point out that the system of neoliberal globalization has entered its last phase; its implosion is clearly visible, as indicated by, among other things, Brexit, Trump's election, and the rise of various forms of neofascism. The rather inglorious end of this system opens up a potentially revolutionary situation in all parts of the world. But this potential will become reality only if radical left forces know how to seize the opportunities offered and design and implement bold offensive strategies based on the reconstruction of the internationalism of workers and peoples in the face of the cosmopolitanism of

the imperialist powers' financial capital. If that does not happen, then the left forces of the West, East, and South will also share responsibility for the ensuing disaster.

For our part, it must be possible to create a coordinating mechanism that connects the disparate struggles around a common goal of creating a world in which the welfare of the people and the planet – not the profits of businesses or elites or self-serving political parties – matter the most. In my view, that would mean something like a very clear, very coherent platform – one that could mobilize the largest number of adherents around core issues, even if some people might not agree on some of the accompanying issues and values. As Samir Amin suggested, the new Global Left needs to look back to the history of socialist movements in order to move forward. In the period after the Bolshevik Revolution, the Third International, also known as the COMINTERN, mobilized the world's socialist and communist parties around specific issues and campaigns. Other large coalitions were the United Front and the Popular Front, both active during World War II. Could one of those models – albeit without the dogmatism and infighting of the past – inspire a more effective WSF?

This could be possible precisely because of the features of the World Social Forum that Walden Bello identified in 'The World Social Forum at the Crossroad':

Quite a number of 'old movement' groups participate in the WSF, including old-line 'democratic centralist' parties as well as traditional social democratic parties affiliated with the Socialist International. Yet none of these has put much effort into steering the WSF towards more centralized or hierarchical modes of organizing. At the same time, despite their suspicion of political parties, the 'new movements' never sought to exclude the parties and their affiliates from playing a significant role in the Forum. Indeed, the 2004 WSF in Mumbai was organized jointly by an unlikely coalition of social movements and Marxist-Leninist parties, a set of actors that are not known for harmonious relations on the domestic front.

What Bello's observation suggests to me is that any new International would look rather different from the COMINTERN, more inclusive and less dogmatic, and certainly with the participation of many more women than was the case before, but still with a definite structure, a coherent platform, and leadership capable of taking 'the movement' forward in a more strategic manner at national, regional, and global levels. Samir Amin's call for a Fifth International must be taken seriously, as it could be the trigger that sets off what Chase-Dunn and colleagues have referred to as the World Revolution of 20xx. A return to a more formal organizing structure with clear political goals and a unified strategy to achieve those goals through alliances with like-minded political parties and left-wing social movements across the globe could finally pose a more serious challenge to the current global system and prevent its capture by the extreme Right.

Notes

1. Available at https://archive.is/20051112235616/http://www.zmag.org/sustainers/content/2005-02/20group_of_nineteen.cfm.
2. <https://focusweb.org/taking-the-movement-forward/>.
3. <https://www.waldenbello.org/the-world-social-forum-at-the-crossroads/>.
4. <https://greattransition.org/publication/world-political-party>.
5. See <https://www.progressive-international.org/open-call/>.

Disclosure statement

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