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Race-class-gender articulation and the Fifth International

Biko Agozino

Department of Sociology, Virginia Tech, Blacksburg, VA, USA

ABSTRACT

The proposal for a Fifth International to be organized immediately is a call that has been made many times in the past without being fully actualized (League, 2008). The revival of this call by Samir Amin before his death deserves serious consideration in honor of his lifelong dedication to scholar-activism in the interest of revolutionary causes (Amin, 2018). To make a new international successful, the failures of the previous internationals should be studied with a view of avoiding the pitfalls that made them crumble. This reflection will focus on a close reading of the call by Samir Amin to see if it embodies some contradictions that may imperil the cause and course of a new international just like the previous ones.

KEYWORDS

Race; class; gender;
articulation; international;
Amin

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.

Introduction

The First International Workingmen’s Association was formed partly to oppose calls from the cotton capitalists for Britain to enter the American Civil War on the side of the slave-holders (Shraffenberger, 2019). Marx led the opposition from the start of the war by refocusing his opinion editorials that started in 1852 by explaining the European class conflicts to Americans but shifted to the analysis of the war against slavery in the *New York Tribune* in support of the Union Army (Marx, 1852–1862). Marx drafted the constitution of the First International and wrote the congratulatory ‘address to the American people’ on their re-election of Abraham Lincoln (Marx, 1864). The First International threatened a general strike if Britain joined the pro-slavery rebellion against the United States. They celebrated the victory of the anti-slavery forces in 1865 (Zimmerman, 2013). In *Capital*, there are hundreds of references to the slave, to Africans, the Negro, and to race with clear indication

to workers of the world that the abolition of slavery was the precondition for the abolition of ‘wage slavery’ (Agozino, 2014). C. L. R. James understood this following his study of the errors of the fore-runners of the Third International in his (James, 1937) treatise on *World Revolution*, leading him to declare a year later in *The Black Jacobins*, that the Haitian revolutionaries were ‘closer to a modern proletariat than any group of workers in existence at the time’ (James, 1938, p. 86). Marx used slavery in two senses, pre-feudal slavery in his earlier writings and industrialized capitalist slavery in *Das Kapital* (Marx, 1867).

For instance, Marx observed that the struggle for the 40-hour week was not won until slavery was ended (Marx, 1867). In other words, the First International was organized against class exploitation of workers in articulation with the struggle against the oppression of nationalities and racial groups and in articulation against gender oppression, despite the male title of Workingmen’s Association. The departure from the race-class-gender articulation or intersectionality model that Marx envisaged by the organizers of subsequent internationals may be part of the reasons why the organizational aims were not sustained. That error first appeared in the First International in the sense that the members were all white and all male with the exception of the son-in-law of Marx, Paul Lafargue, who was born in Cuba to a French man and an African woman (Lafargue, 1883), apparently, his wife, Eleanor Marx, was not a member despite being a revolutionary leader in her own rights (Marx, 1891); and the case of a woman, Harriet Law, who wrote to the Association about women’s rights and was invited to join the International Workingmen’s Association after a debate about the suitability of her membership (Schwarz, 2010).

The call by Samir Amin and articulation theory

By calling for two slots of invitation to be reserved for Africa in the Fifth International, Samir Amin may have been trying to prevent the racist contradictions of Eurocommunism but he still left the gender contradiction unaddressed. Furthermore, by recommending only one slot for Asia and two for ‘the United States and the Anglo-Saxon world’ as recognized regions, the over-representation of white privilege is likely to prevail contrary to the numerical and communist party track records of China and India which deserve more than one slot each, just like Africa. Given also the internationalist giants that have emerged from the Caribbean, including Cuba, with an impressive record of revolutionary successes, the region should also be recognized as an organizational region of the Fifth International. Moreover, recognizing South America, North America, and Australia as regions does not guarantee that Indigenous Peoples would be adequately represented by white settler colonialists and so Indigenous Peoples deserve to be brought into the International on their own terms.

The split in the First International between the anarcho-syndicalists who wished to focus on economic struggles alone and the Marxists who emphasized the organization of social democratic parties to fight for state power in the interest of all the oppressed is a lesson for those organizing for a Fifth International. Samir Amin alluded to this when he observed in his letter that the Fifth International would also support communities that are struggling against oppressive state power. This implies that the concern of the International would not be class struggles alone in isolation from the struggles against racism and sexism simply because class exploitation is not experienced in isolation from racism or ethnic oppression and sexism. This point needs to be emphasized because it was one of the original concerns of Marx that was relatively lost by Eurocommunism or by those that Derrida called Marx and Sons (Derrida, 2002).

Amilcar Cabral (1972), Walter Rodney (1972), Frantz Fanon (1963), C. L. R. James (1938), and Stuart Hall (1980, 2016) have emphasized that it will be ridiculous for any crude economist to

organize the resistance against apartheid, for example, simply and exclusively from the standpoint of class struggles and without the race-class-gender articulation, disarticulation and rearticulation of social relations in societies structured in dominance. As Cabral (1972), who like Fanon, James and Hall, was married to a European, explained to African Americans who asked what they could do to support the struggles in Africa:

We are not racists. We are fundamentally and deeply against any kind of racism. Even when people are subjected to racism we are against racism from those who have been oppressed by it. In our opinion – not from dreaming but from a deep analysis of the real condition of the existence of mankind and the division of societies – racism is a result of certain circumstances. It is not eternal in any latitude in the world. It is not the result of historical and economic conditions. And we cannot answer racism with racism. It is not possible. In our country, despite some racist manifestations by the Portuguese, we are not fighting against the Portuguese people or whites. We are fighting for the freedom of our people – to free our people and to allow them to be able to love any kind of human being. You cannot love when you are a slave. It is very difficult. In combating racism we don't make progress if we combat the people themselves. We have to combat the causes of racism. If a bandit comes into my house and I have a gun I cannot shoot the shadow of this bandit. I have to shoot the bandit. Many people lose energy and effort, and make sacrifices combating shadows. We have to combat the material reality that produces the shadow. If we cannot change the light that is one cause of the shadow, we can at least change the body. It is important to avoid confusion between the shadow and the body that projects the shadow. We are encouraged by the fact that each day more of our people, here and in Africa, realise this reality. This reinforces our confidence in our final victory. (Cabral, 1972)

It is not enough for the Fifth International to call on Workers of the World to Unite without questioning the extent to which racism, imperialism and patriarchy divide the working class and weaken the struggle to end exploitation as Vladimir Lenin (1917), W. E. B. Du Bois (1935), Kwame Nkrumah (1965), Mao Tse-tung (1963), and Fidel Castro (1966) warned. As Castro put this:

What the peoples have most in common to unite the people of three continents and of all the world today is the struggle against imperialism (applause); the struggle against colonialism and neocolonialism, the struggle against racism and, in short, all the phenomena which are the contemporary expression we call imperialism, whose center, axis, and principal support of Yankee imperialism. (Castro, 1966)

Harold Wolpe wanted to find out why apartheid imposed cheap wages on exploited mineworkers in South Africa (Wolpe, 1972). He came to the conclusion that the capitalist economy of apartheid was not separate from the pre-capitalist economy or what Cheikh Anta Diop identified as the African Mode of Production (Diop, 1981), similar to what Marx called the Asiatic Mode of Production (Marx, 1843). Thus, the capitalist mode of production is articulated with the pre-capitalist mode of production in such a way that the exploited mineworkers shared their cheap wages with their families in the homelands while the women and children in the homelands shared in having their labor exploited as domestic servants in the homes of white farmers to support the meager earnings of the migrant workers.

It is not only the workers who were exploited since even the peasants cried out that they had been exploited and oppressed a great deal, according to the Arusha Declaration of Julius Nyerere (TANU, 1967). Wolpe applied the theory of articulation by Marx from *Capital* to explain this. Stuart Hall (1980) abstracted the theory and applied it to the racist-sexist-imperialist exploitation of the working class, ethnic minorities and women all over the world, including in the metropole where authoritarian populism thrives by mobilizing the votes of working class people against their own interests, recruiting them to wage war against the working people around the world and empowering them to police the poor at home militarily, by paying them what Du Bois (1935) called the psychological

wages of white supremacy. Hall concluded that this calls for a strategy of coalition-building and alliance formation by the international movement against capitalist exploitation, racist oppression and patriarchal domination worldwide.

Critical reflections on the call

With all due respect and support for the call, it appears to me that Samir Amin erred by stating that the first sign of weakness in the previous internationals was due to:

The extreme fragmentation of the struggles, whether at the local or world level, which are always specific and conducted in particular places and subject-matters (ecology, women's rights, social services, community demands, etc.) The rare campaigns conducted at the national or even world level have not had any significant success in that they have not forced any changes of the policies being carried out by those in power. Many of these struggles have been absorbed by the system and foster the illusion that it is possible to reform it. (Amin, 2018)

The above formulation is deeply flawed because there is evidence that the ecological movement, women's movement, civil rights movement, and community demands for the legalization of marijuana, for instance, have won significant policy changes from the lumpen bourgeoisie worldwide. Instead of seeing these as separate struggles that are doomed to failure, the Fifth International should aim to exercise hegemony over them by offering intellectual and moral leadership through alliance and coalition building the way that the South African Communist Party did in the anti-apartheid struggle (SACP, 2012).

Samir Amin's letter rightly warned against the dangers of fracturing the Fifth International the way that the previous ones were fractured by internal contradictions. However, when he included the struggle against patriarchy or for women's rights among the possible fracture points in the International, he made a serious mistake that should be guarded against. The struggle against the oppression of women is indeed a core part of the struggle against all forms of oppression given that the oppressed women are our mothers and grandmothers, our wives and co-workers, our daughters and our girl-friends, our comrades.

There is no right that would be guaranteed to women that would be a threat to the working class and that was why Marx and Engels were keen to organize against the oppression of women at a time that the structural conditions did not allow women to participate in large numbers in the First International (Brown, 2014). Today, no serious international organization against oppression can afford to marginalize the struggles of women and Indigenous Peoples for fear of fragmentation. The Fifth International must strategically embrace the struggles against patriarchy and racism and structurally aim for gender parity and racial diversity among the officers of the International to make it more sustainable.

While warning the Fifth International against the dangers of fragmentation, Samir Amin appeared quite ready to fragment Africa by carving North Africa or the Mediterranean world out of Africa as one of the regions to be given a quota representation at the initial meeting of the international. He also appeared to be clannish by nominating Tunisia as a possible host of the initial meeting whereas South Africa has one of the oldest communist parties in the world (SACP, 2012) that happens to remain in a ruling coalition with the African National Congress, deserving more of the honor to host such a meeting on African soil in spite of the inevitable contradictions arising from the involvement in what Joe Slovo called the national democratic revolution against apartheid (Slovo, 1988). Given that the African states are organized as the African Union Commission without

dichotomizing North Africa from what is pejoratively called Sub-Saharan Africa, according to Herbert Ekwe-Ekwe (2012), the Fifth International should be supportive of the Pan African movement (Agozino, 2017) that has been going on for almost as long as the International itself. In this direction, the sixth region of the African Union Commission, the African Diaspora also deserves a seat at the table of the Fifth International.

The call by Samir Amin for the invitation to the initial meeting of the International to be limited to a few leaders of about ten or twelve flies in the face of the fact that the First International was reputed to have had as many as 8 million members. Twelve leaders in a room somewhere are engaged in a seminar and not necessarily organizing an International Movement. While endorsing the strategic call by Amin for leaders to be recognized, it may be better to allow a million leaders to emerge from local to the global levels, organically as Gramsci would have preferred (Gramsci, 2000).

Conclusion

The strategy for a successful International should learn from the First International that organizing locally to oppose oppression globally is the way to go. Let the Fifth International start by simultaneously organizing a social democratic party in every locality in the world and let those parties elect their delegates to attend future conventions of the Fifth International. The clarion call of Samir Amin should be extended beyond his 'Dear comrades, Dear activists, Dear workers' to include students, the unemployed, farmers, women, and Dear despised Africans and Indigenous Peoples.

Finally, we may need to update the Internationale song (Pottier, 1871). It is dated with the Paris Commune and it is culturally specific to the extent that the rendition does not capture the mood of the Hip Hop generations around the world. Let the Fifth International commission composers and artists to come up with a new song for the current era. The new song will be sensitive to critical race-class-gender articulation theory and praxis instead of simply rallying the working class that has been bribed with psychological wages of whiteness and weakened by anti-union policies. We may need to jazz up the lyrics by adding opposition to white supremacy (which is a threat to all) and imperialist patriarchy so that we may sound more convincing when the chorus reiterates the refrain,

The International working class

Shall be the human race!

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

Dr Biko Agozino is a Professor of Sociology and Africana Studies, Virginia Tech. He was the Director of Administration at the Directorate for Literacy that organized free literacy classes for workers in Nigeria, was an Associate Editor of the free *Mass Line: The Liberation Journal*, with Eskor Toyo as Editor. He was involved in the formation of the Labour Party, in alliance with organized labour, that campaigned for the restoration of democracy in Nigeria in the 1980s until the military dictatorship banned the party. He was a founding member of the International Governing Council of the Center for Democracy and Development that advocated against authoritarian rule in West Africa. He is currently a member of the Democratic Socialists of America. He is the author of *Black Women and the Criminal Justice System: Towards the Decolonisation of Victimisation* (Ashgate, 1997, republished by Routledge in 2018) and of *Counter-Colonial Criminology: A*

Critique of Imperialist Reason (Pluto, 2003), among other works. His film, 'Shouters and the Control Freak Empire' won the Best International Short Documentary at the Columbia Gorge Film Festival, USA, 2011.

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