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# Rethinking Samir Amin's legacy and the case for a political organization of the global justice movement

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## ABSTRACT

A case is made here for the desirability and viability of the late Samir Amin's call for a new International. However, the project to forge a political organization of the global justice movement must in the first instance draw lessons from the limitations of the recent network structure of new social movements, notably the World Social Forum, and rectify the failures of the old internationals of left-wing cadres. The actualization of such a radical idea also needs to observe the realpolitik of class formation and class struggle under conditions of the imperialistic globalization of capitalism today. Envisioned as a plural and participatory learning organization, the new International's progression should be evolutionary and its strategic engagements have to balance the imperatives of political realism with the ideals of democratic values.

## KEYWORDS

Class formation; class struggle; global justice movement; new international; Samir Amin; World Social Forum

*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

Samir Amin's demise on 12 August 2018 is a great loss not only to the left intelligentsia but also to the global justice movement. It comes at a time when much critical thinking and progressive political work need to be done in order to prevent humankind from eventually falling into barbarism, chaos and environmental catastrophe. Amin devoted his intellectual life to unmasking the mechanisms of Eurocentrism and the historical evolution of world capitalism, so as to craft an effective resistance against these oppressive structures and build an alternative socialist future. He was unrivalled as a scholar-activist, with high degree of knowledge on geopolitical economy and active engagements in social movement struggles.

In one of his last writings addressed to activists, Amin (2018) argued for the necessity and potentiality of ‘a new Internationale of workers and peoples’ to counteract the social forces and ideology of capitalist imperialism. This proposal came from his perception of the ‘political impotence’ of progressive movements vis-à-vis the dangers of the globalized capitalist system controlled by the Western bourgeoisie (Amin, 2018). Drawing upon his critical examination between the potential effectiveness and actual performance of social movements in the last thirty years of imperialist globalization, Amin problematized ‘the extreme fragmentation of the struggles, whether at the local or world level’ (Amin, 2018). He regretted that the counter-hegemonic movements had lost and abandoned their originally global and anti-capitalist class orientations, largely due to coercion and cooptation on them by vested interests in the Triad (i.e., the US, Western Europe, and Japan). Yet, he was relentless in his Marxist understanding of historical processes in the context of the conflictive world structure of ‘generalized-monopoly capitalism’ dominated by the Triad which, at the same time, created the precarious conditions of ‘generalized proletarianization’ of waged workers, salaried middle classes, and market-dependent peasants (see also, Amin, 2013, 2014). He envisioned the historical possibility of overcoming this structural contradiction through the mobilization and consolidation of the victims of the prevailing exploitative system into a radical worldwide organization. He was coherent in utilizing scientific Marxism as a theoretical tool to critique capitalism, analyze tendencies for historical change, and advance socialism as an essentially political project.

As expected, Amin’s appeal for a new International to restore class politics of the left at the global scale is haunted by the specters of bitterness and successive defeats of the old internationals. This is despite the expressed vision for the new, Fifth International to be a democratic global movement led by a South-South solidarity of workers, peasants and peoples from peripheral countries in the continents of Africa, Latin America, and Asia – which is intended to be different from the First, Second, Third, and Fourth Internationals that were directed by a leadership or committee of socialist and communist cadres from the Northern and Western countries, including Russia. Still, the project to establish a global political organization based on an anti-imperialist internationalism is both desirable and viable. It is worthy of serious consideration also for activists who never let their usual intellectual pessimism get the better of their political will to make transformative strategies and alternative futures happen.

Public protests, civil disobedience, labor strikes, and political opposition against injustices can occur spontaneously in different countries with diverse socioeconomic regimes. The challenge, however, is to sustain their revolutionary momentum, which a cohesive political organization of global justice movements can provide.

Amin was reaching out to left militants, including fellow travelers, to involve themselves in brainstorming about the agenda of forming a truly global and progressive organization against imperialist capitalism. Such gesture must be perceived as an openness to have a dialogue, even with skeptical and disgruntled sections of the left who have had disappointing experiences with international efforts at activist conferences and labor movement organizing. The novelty of the proposed project is that it starts with a humble admission of the mistakes of the left in the history of internationalizing people’s struggles against the world capitalist system. It is substantively different from past initiatives where the questions ‘what is the problem in the world’ and ‘what is to be done with it’ were the starting points of the left’s united front. Indeed, participants willing to contribute to the process of building an organization for the new International have to admit and learn from: [1] the limitations of recent global discussion forums of civil society and social movements, especially the once-promising World Social Forum (WSF); and [2] the need to rectify the organizational errors in the age-old workers’ internationals.

## Lessons from the World Social Forum

The routine in the conduct of social and people's forums from the 1990s on has become all too familiar. Almost the entire time schedule of their program of activities are allotted to talks, speeches and debates on wide-ranging thematic and sectoral issues. With the notable exception of the WSF, the main output of international activist gatherings like the Asia-Europe People's Forum (AEPF) is a consolidated final statement or declaration written for public consumption and policy advocacy. It is counter-intuitive, however, that there is hardly any session in these discussion forums where participants plan about organizational development. It also appears that there is scant regard for conducting at least interactive conversations about the inter-national and cross-thematic coordination of campaigns despite the recognition of the intersectionality of social problems and the inter-dependence of the needed solutions.

Take, for example, the AEPF, which holds interregional events biennially since 1996. Geographical representation is the usual emphasis on the composition of resource speakers in specific workshops within the forum. However, it may be more impactful if each workshop theme had participants from across all issue areas. Thus, instead of designing a workshop on food sovereignty for the simple purpose of articulating an Asian and a European view, this particular topic must also be tackled from the perspectives of fellow activists who have long singly focused on their respective thematic clusters. Such arrangement shall encourage, say, peace activists, human rights defenders, and labor unionists to think about the ways to link their campaigns and advocacies with the question of immigration, the problem of climate change, or the debates on inequality and economic reforms.

The experience, feedback, as well as frustrations, of activists in major discussion forums, especially in the WSF, should definitely inform the process of forming the new International. The WSF, notwithstanding its claim to be a horizontal and transversal organization, manifests the ubiquity of power relations (i.e. the relationship of dominance, both hidden and overt) even among progressive individuals and between social movements. Real existing differences based on gender, geography, educational attainment, status and class also define the inequalities in the assembly and interactions of activists. Nevertheless, despite differences in life circumstances and lived experiences, the strongest basis of unity of activists in the global justice movement is the shared consciousness against varied manifestations of oppression and exploitation.

Much has been said and written about the crucial shortcomings of the WSF, its affiliated regional forums and supported national campaigns to realize the objective of altering neoliberal globalization. Among the critiques of the history of the WSF, the most useful for organizational rethinking of the proponents of the new International are the specific observations on how this so-called 'movement of movements' has evolved into a mere talk shop, an apolitical group, a leaderless and fragmented opposition, and a non-global formation with ahistorical worldview (see, for example, Hanin & Afaya, 2016; Mestrum, 2017; Wallerstein, 2016). But it is also important for the new International to fully appreciate the WSF phenomenon as a concrete representation of present-day realities in organizing emancipatory struggles at the global level. In particular, recall how its origins as a trans-national open space had inspired confidence in civil society and social movements to participate actively in envisioning alternative futures through a multiplicity of thematic issues on a cosmopolitan structure (see Santos, 2005, 2006).

There is a real danger for the new International project to be captured by ideological hardliners who may easily denounce most participants in the WSF as at best 'passive victims' of capitalist globalization, or at worst active agents of 'false' popular consciousness. If the new International had to act consistently based on the precepts of political realism and democratic values, then its strategies

for organizing must draw lessons from the WSF experience. The pluralist composition of the WSF, alongside other characteristics of new social movements, is a real eye-opener for contemporary left politics. The reality of pluralism in the global justice movement does not only present a difficult challenge for working-class formation, but it also demands deep reflections about the limitations, if not failures, of traditional working-class organization and ideology.

### **Class formation and class struggle under imperialism**

Since the new International would ascribe primacy to class struggle, in which the workers are principal actors of global and social change, it is most appropriate for the organization to regard existing resources from the WSF and the like as a challenge for their consciousness building programs. Class formation is neither static nor predetermined, but subject to a historical process and thus to political currents. This is not to suggest limiting the horizon of the global struggle, but it is to emphasize the need to improve on the resources and insights from *new* social movements. Here, Ellen Meiksins Wood's perspective about pluralism, in line with the theoretical agenda of renewing classical Marxist's historical materialism, remains compelling for the new International's socialist project:

What is needed is a pluralism that does indeed acknowledge diversity and difference ... that recognizes the systemic unity of capitalism and can distinguish the constitutive relations of capitalism from other inequalities and oppressions ... . We should not confuse respect for the plurality of human experience and social struggles with a complete dissolution of historical causality, where there is nothing but diversity, difference and contingency, no unifying structures, no logic of process, no capitalism and therefore no negation of it, no universal project of human emancipation. (Wood, 1995, p. 263)

The process of class formation is already a tough ideological conflict to be resolved internally between progressives. But the most difficult and dangerous political war for the international left to confront are the specific externally-generated historical circumstances that limit class struggle within and across nations. Beyond trite sloganeering and ungrounded idealism, the left's strategies must account for the global context of imperialism on which social changes, let alone socialist revolutions, would take place.

There is no doubt that Amin had convincingly provided a comprehensive analysis of the contradictory structure of the crisis-ridden capitalist globalization. By identifying the cracks within contemporary imperialism to signify its own unviability, he also pointed to them as political opportunities where social forces of resistance can arise, namely: [i] the reformist responses to economic crises and stagnation in the Triad that are always geared at protecting the interests of transnational oligarchs, rather than the well-being of ordinary citizens; [ii] the violent propensity of the core Triad to not peacefully give up their dominance to peripheral countries – particularly from Asia – even though these economies have actually gained considerably from liberalization policies and technological advances under conditions of neoliberal globalization during the post-Cold War period; and [iii] the ecological disasters that entail the capitalist accumulation process (Amin, 2018; cf. Juego, 2018a). These contradictions, indeed, constitute the objective stimulus in the current conjuncture, providing the rational and necessary conditions for the global left to forge a radical counter-hegemonic bloc.

However, taking into consideration class struggle in the real world, the left should not only downplay what they deem to be weaknesses of the capitalist system, but must not also forget the historical record of the imperial oppressors. This means that the struggle of the international left needs to exert more attention to imperialist capitalism's tendency to interfere in the socio-economic evolution of sovereign states, and its interventionist capacity in weakening national-level social revolutions.

The history of contemporary world politics suggests that there have been no revolutionary states, no alternative regionalism projects, and no militant social movements that have freely operated and organized without them getting subjected to imperialist pressures and the often-violent interventionism of the US-led Triad.

Against this background, Amin's well-known idea of 'de-linking' or 'de-connexion' can be aptly deployed at this historic juncture by regarding it as a concrete geo-political and geo-economic strategy of the global South to bypass the structure of mal-development under imperialism, if not surpass the level of capitalist development of the core countries. This particular method of struggle would aim to realize at least three national goals for developing countries: firstly, the development of productive forces so as to improve the social conditions and quality of life of the population; secondly, the defense of state sovereignty; and thirdly, the creation of a socio-economy of the commons where economic modernity in the manufacturing, agriculture, and service sectors also allows for human flourishing in sustainable communities, creative arts and other alternative ways of living (Juego, 2016). Some may argue that this is currently what China and Russia are attempting to do in their economic modernization and social development strategies to compete with US hegemony. But the fundamental idea is not for the South-South solidarity to engage in an inter-imperialist rivalry with the Triad; it is to break away from the logic of imperialism altogether.

### On solidarity and the learning organization

Operating in the spirit of transnational solidarity, the new International's primary organizational function should be the global coordination of actions of progressive grassroots movements from country to country. For pragmatic and strategic purposes, resistance against imperialist relations and capitalist accumulation processes must give greater focus on the level of local communities and nation-states, where these dominating structures are well-rooted and close to homes of the oppressed multitude. Yet, the new International shall never lose sight of the dynamics in the inter-state system of globalized capitalism, within which different societies, nations and states are fully but unevenly integrated.

The new International can offer itself as an umbrella organization of social movements, labor unions, political parties, progressive politicians, and individual activists pursuing different forms of struggle – ranging from pressure politics and policy lobbying, to formal engagements in democratic elections and state representation – for a just, humane and ecological world. It shall coexist with already established socio-political movements, particularly those well organized by the sectors of labor and peasantry (i.e., the global union federations and the international peasant's movement La Via Campesina), and on the issues of migration, ecology, trade and taxation. At its formative stage, the new International may operate as a loose organization. Subjection to organizational discipline must depend on the consent and willingness of members. An observer or affiliate status should be open to those not yet ready for the duties and obligations required of a full member.

While the agenda of building 'new' solidarities has become a popular theme in today's global activist networks, there is also a need to rediscover 'old' solidarities, specifically with the working class and the peace movement. Historically, these two progressive formations had been at the forefront of international resistance against capitalist globalization and imperialist wars. Thus, they were the first targets of demolition by the coercive forces of capitalism and imperialism. Contemporary social movements organized around egalitarian principles (e.g., the Occupy movement) and liberal identity politics (e.g., human rights activism, pro-refugee campaigns, and the #MeToo movement) can advance their causes more effectively and meaningfully with the simultaneous mobilization of

labor unions and anti-war activists. The new International must be able to take a holistic perspective that understands the connections and underlying causes of all forms of oppression and exploitation based on class, race, gender and sexual orientation. For instance, in addressing the recent mass immigration phenomenon and refugee crisis, campaigns to stop wars of encroachment and reparations for victim countries of these crimes against humanity, combined with concrete policy proposals to resolve the causes of underdevelopment in the developing world, might have much more discursive power for popular mobilization than the usual activist positions against right-wing xenophobia and Islamophobia (Juego, 2018b).

As a 'learning organization', the new International must observe a continuous dialogue between bottom-up and top-down approaches to decision-making. Akin to a global coordinating council, it has the responsibility of keeping into perspective the varying initiatives, campaigns and mass actions at all geographical levels of membership. It must have an open mind, in which its idealism is grounded on a pragmatic understanding of *realpolitik* especially in struggles at national and local scales. This requires an appreciation of the dialectics between reform and revolution, and of the expected political necessity of forging tactical alliances and strategic compromises as particular circumstances arise.

Solidarity in this relationship is not only revolutionary, but also evolutionary, whereby the development of the global organization and local movements is understood through a process of their co-evolution. They all learn from and with each other's perspectives and experiences. The intended result is a powerful synergy between global, regional, national and local struggles.

### Past internationals, democracy and the audacity of struggle

The new International will have to guard against the predisposition of the organization's leadership to counter-revolutionary attitudes. It ought to be mindful of the importance of avoiding the vices that plagued the bitter splits and historical enmities in the last four Internationals: sectarianism, centralism, vanguardism and intellectual elitism (recall, for example, Trotsky, 1935). Democracy, or democratic decision-making, is the unifying virtue that most modern-day activists and old-timers hope for a progressive socio-political organization.

By nature of its composition as a broad-based coalition of multiple activist movements around the world, the new International needs to embody a progressive kind of representational politics, where pluralism, diversity and inclusiveness are inherent. In a very diverse formation, the foremost concern of a democratic organization is not to definitively problematize who a participant speaks for, but to mainly ensure both the freedom and equality of speech of every member. Whether a participant represents oneself, a membership, or a constituency in deliberations and decision-making process must not be the basis for determining the power of an argument and the legitimacy of an idea (cf. Teivainen, 2016). Participatory democracy guarantees full rights to every member, and enjoins all representatives to voice out and express themselves without threats and intimidation from fellow members. Decisions over positions on pressing issues and plans of action will still have to be made through dialogue, research, and discussion based on reasoned judgement, progressive principles, and calibrated strategies in the interest of the common good. Yet democratic decisions on courses of action will depend on social contexts, historical specificities, and organizational capabilities.

Of course, it is never easy to establish and manage a genuinely democratic and progressive global organization. Amin's call was not made out of academic naiveté. Up to his death, he kept his revolutionary idealism and optimism. He had an inimitable can-do attitude and determination to carry on with the struggle, and remained hopeful about the capacity of collective and coordinated action of

committed militants to lead the global transformation. Indeed, Samir Amin left an intellectual and political legacy for activists contemplating to bring to life a new International for the intensified struggles at this historic moment: the audacity to lose, but not without trying.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## Notes on contributor

**Bonn Juego** is postdoctoral researcher and university teacher at the University of Jyväskylä, Finland. He has been granted visiting research fellowships at the City University of Hong Kong and the University of Copenhagen, and has lectured on global political economy at the University of Helsinki. Prior to pursuing a PhD at Aalborg University, he worked for the Manila-based secretariat and coordination of the Asia-Europe People's Forum.

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