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Carrying on Samir Amin's legacy

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ABSTRACT

The academic Marxism of the 20th century has shied away from this responsibility, preferring relatively comfortable staying within the walls of universities. Unlike these academic thinkers Samir Amin was one of the few who did not accept this situation. He never considered himself merely a theorist: connection to praxis was vital for him. From this perspective he advocated a project of Fifth International to address sharp and systemic crisis afflicting leftist movements. Each new stage of the evolution of capitalism requires a corresponding transformation of the anti-capitalist forces. Nevertheless, a new political alternative can't be constructed artificially. It can only gradually emerge out of collective experience of different struggles.

KEYWORDS

Revolution; progress; left;
Marxism; Soviet Union

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.

When Karl Marx wrote his famous Eleventh Thesis on Feuerbach, demanding that philosophers not only explain the world, but also change it, he set before his followers a major problem, not only theoretical or even political one, but also moral. This is because one can only change the world through practical action – praxis. This means that no matter how good and adequate the theory is, it is never sufficient. Praxis involves passion, an uncertainty of the result, a possibility of an error and a responsibility for it.

The academic Marxism of the 20th century has shied away from this responsibility, preferring relatively comfortable staying within the walls of universities, engaging in a fascinating immersion into the depths of an intellectual quest. In fairness, one must admit that this choice was not entirely voluntary. Neither communist parties, which consolidated their ideological canons as an unshakable and formal symbol of faith, nor social democratic organizations, which preferred empirical search for specific short-term solutions to local problems of capitalism, required any new theoretical

discoveries. Moreover, they were mortally afraid of them, systematically banishing, and often repressing those thinkers who defiantly tried to find new theoretical paths. History severely punished left-wing organizations for such disregard for the theory. Although it would be wrong to reduce the reasons for the collapse of the communist parties and the crisis of social democracy only to this one factor, the gap between theory and practice undoubtedly aggravated the catastrophe. In turn, academic Marxism, locked in a cozy academic ghetto, became toothless, safe for the ruling classes, and increasingly boring.

Samir Amin was one of the few Marxist thinkers who did not accept this situation. He never considered himself merely a theorist: connection to praxis was vital for him. As a political activist, he was forced to leave his native Egypt. On many occasions, he was subjected to sharp criticism when he did not shy away from an unpopular position that he considered to be politically justified. Even when speaking of theoretical analysis, he was full of passion. Not simply aiming to discuss ongoing processes, Samir Amin also constantly sought ways to influence them. He did not always turn out to be right, but ultimately this is the essence of praxis. Only one who does nothing at all makes no mistakes; only an idea that does not affect any practical matters causes no controversy. At the very end of his life, Samir Amin called for the creation of a new Fifth International in order to respond to the crisis of neo-liberal globalization. This was the outstanding thinker and activist's sort of last will and testament, appealing to those who must seize the banner and carry it further. But what can and should be done practically?

The idea of the need for a new international was brought forth not only by the obvious crisis into which the world capitalist system has plunged at the end of the second decade of the 21st century, but also by a sharp and systemic crisis afflicting leftist movements. All political forms that the conflict between labor and capital took over the course of the 20th century exhausted themselves in the new millennium. The 20th century, which indeed also began with an acute crisis of the world capitalist order, spawned a whole series of global structures and movements that offered themselves as alternatives. Along with the appearance of communist and social democratic parties, which developed primarily in Europe, class struggle on the periphery of the world system gave rise to various versions of national liberation and populist movements, which also challenged the bourgeois order. The end of the 20th century, however, was marked by a deep crisis or even a collapse of all these organizations. The picture that we are presented with at the moment looks very sad. The world communist movement is no more. The state parties that headed the states of the Eastern bloc underwent profound bureaucratic degeneration and ceased to exist. The industrial bourgeois economy had not overcome its inherent contradictions: on the contrary, these contradictions transpired with greater clarity. At the beginning of the 21st century, China became not just a part of the capitalist world-system, but its most important stabilizer. It played a crucial role in the global bourgeois counter-reformation process. Transferring production to the Middle Kingdom has become an important factor in attacking workers' rights in old industrial countries, while the new Chinese bourgeoisie, which has become a player on the global market, actively demands from its former Western teachers even more aggressive elimination of social guarantees. Of course, today we are witnessing how the crisis begins to engulf the Chinese model itself. It is quite possible, against the backdrop of the unprecedented growth of the industrial working class, we will see here the emergence of new militant organizations of working people. The irony of history, though, is that any action against the logic of capitalism will push the labor movement into a conflict with the party, which still calls itself 'communist'.

The historic defeat of social democracy was less dramatic and spectacular, but no less tragic. Social democratic parties, even when maintaining their positions in the electoral system, turned – using

the expression of Antonio Gramsci – into empty shells, structures devoid of any political content. It would be unjust, therefore, to accuse the Social Democrats of today of reformism. Most of these parties have long forgotten what a reform is. Only the color of their banners, if that, distinguishes them from liberals and conservatives. The regimes created by national liberation movements have become bourgeois and corrupt so much that, at times, they are worse than the old colonial state for the populations of people they control.

Therefore, we see that the crisis of capitalism and the crisis of anti-capitalist alternatives go hand in hand. Worse, it was the collapse of all revolutionary and reformist alternatives to the rule of capital that became the most important factor in the destruction of the bourgeois order in the long run. The existence of these alternatives (even with all their negative aspects) disciplined and restrained the ruling classes, forcing capital not only to make concessions to the workers, but also to be more demanding and sober about themselves and not to completely believe in their own ideology and propaganda.

The global defeat of the left has stimulated rapid corruption and degradation of the capitalist classes and, as a result, has aggravated all the contradictions and problems that the system faces. The collapse of the left movement has given rise to a more acute need for a socialist alternative than ever before in the past 50 years. Moreover, this need, regardless of what intellectuals say and write, is acutely felt by the masses spontaneously taking to the streets – in India, in France, in Arab countries.

However, the need for transformation does not directly translate into a possibility of successful transformation. Existence of revolutionaries is not an absolute requirement for the destruction of the system: the system can perfectly destroy itself. However, in order to get out of the crisis, in order to find new ways of social development, we need conscious social forces, organizations and leaders.

In this sense, Samir Amin's call for a new International sounds quite timely. The only question is: should we take this appeal literally? Do we need to try to create international organizational structures, hold congresses, and write a program? I think that for this, the moment has yet to come.

The First International was necessary in order to formalize the very idea of a workers' socialist organization. It could neither fight for power, nor it could even conduct mass agitation – local structures for this were lacking. It was naturally replaced by the Second International, which united massive political parties. It is well known that German social democrats formed the core of the organization. For some time German social democratic movement was a model organization, and everyone else at least looked up to it, if it was not aligned with it. The collapse of the Second International was associated not only with the opportunism of its leadership and with the split of almost all parties into the left and the right wings, but also with the appearance of a new successful model of political organization represented by Russian Bolshevism. It was completely natural to create the Third (communist) International on its basis.

The rejection of the global revolutionary project by the Soviet leadership under Stalin naturally led to the liquidation of the Comintern. Leon Trotsky tried to revive the revolutionary tradition under the banner of the Fourth International, but nothing came of it. In part, this happened because the sociopolitical niches where the new radical project could take root were already occupied in most countries. Trotskyism could not find a new mass base for itself without taking away the supporters of the already existing social democratic and communist parties and thereby undermining the already existing and functioning left movement. This movement was by no means free of the vices pointed out by Trotsky and his comrades. It still worked and its existence was still important to protect the interests and the rights of workers. Therefore, the politicians of the official workers'

parties, who considered the Trotskyists not so much as critics, but rather as a kind of subversive element within the labor movement, were right in their own way. The ideological criticism of the Trotskyists in relation to the leadership of social democracy and the communist parties was often justified. However, Trotskyism as a political project was rejected not only by the leaders, but also by the working masses, who reasonably did not want to exchange a barely visible revolutionary crane in the sky for the opportunist bird in their hands.

The situation is completely different in the beginning of the 21st century. Most countries do not have strong and massive left parties. The old left parties have lost their organic connection with the masses, their authority and trust, even among their own voters. The space is objectively clear for new political forces. In addition, the changes that capitalism has undergone dictate the need for an emergence of new forms of the left-wing movement. Under new conditions, reviving the forms of revolutionary organization perfectly justified in the past is as meaningless as trying to form a Macedonian phalanx to fight against tanks. Each new stage of the evolution of capitalism requires a corresponding transformation of the anti-capitalist forces. The stiffness of the structures of the 'old left' that hindered this transformation was one of the reasons for its collapse.

Nevertheless, a new political alternative can be neither invented nor constructed artificially or mechanically. Our task today is to collect and integrate the experience of the struggle (including the political one) accumulated in different countries. We are entering a period when bold strategic experimentation is needed. Jeremy Corbyn and his supporters are trying to recreate the Labor Party of Great Britain. At the same time, we see how 'yellow vests', putting forward essentially the same slogans and demands, are avoiding political parties. The trade unions are politicizing in India, while in Spain, the left-wing activists are trying to create a new populist party from below. All these numerous and diverse experiments must still demonstrate their potential before a kind of common vision is formed on this basis, which would allow building of a more or less stable global coalition.

It would have to be a coalition, because the new era does not give us reason to hope that we will have a monolithic and homogeneous party with a clear ideology, united leadership, and unambiguous political decisions.

Translated by Natalie Minkovsky

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

Boris Kagarlitsky was a dissident in the Soviet times and in 1990–1993 a deputy to Moscow Soviet (provincial council) till it was dissolved by president Boris Yeltsin in a coup d'état in 1993. He is currently a professor at Moscow Higher School of Social and Economic Sciences, editor of Internet journal *Rabkor*.