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Climate justice and sustained transnational mobilization

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ABSTRACT

Samir Amin's final essay called for the creation of a new international organization of progressive social forces. Here I review evidence from twenty-first century transnational movements germane for understanding the likelihood of the emergence of such an international organization and the issues and sectors most likely to facilitate coalitional unity. More specifically, the ecological crises identified by Amin in the form of global warming and climate change have created an unprecedented global environmental threat capable of unifying diverse social strata across the planet. The climate justice movement has already established a global infrastructure and template to coordinate a new international organization for confronting neoliberal forms of globalization. Pre-existing movement organizing around environmental racism, climate justice in the global South, and recent intersectional mobilizations serve as promising models for building an enduring international organization that will represent subaltern groups and have a substantial impact on world politics.

KEYWORDS

Climate change; climate justice; transnational social movements; threats; global warming

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 transition to the neoliberal form of global capitalism in the late twentieth century corresponded with a variety of novel forms of resistance at the local, national, and international levels of political life (Almeida & Chase-Dunn, 2018). Neoliberalism produces new models of unequal development (Amin, 1976) between the capitalist core and periphery as well within nation states along with a host of tensions and threats motivating popular movements. These struggles will likely intensify as we move into the third decade of the new millennium. At the local level, collective action centres

on everyday forms of resistance and grassroots struggles over racism, land grabbing, mining and mega development projects (Almeida, 2019). At the national level, opposition to neoliberalism manifests in the form of social movement campaigns against a bundle of economic liberalization policies that include austerity cuts, free trade agreements, privatization, de-regulation, and labour flexibility laws (Silva, 2009; Walton & Seddon, 1994). At the transnational level, opposition to international capital is most pronounced in the global economic justice movement, the World Social Forums, and, increasingly, the movement for Climate Justice, which is the focus of this essay.

In past decades, sociologists theorized that global capitalist accumulation would create its own self-induced limits through the depletion of natural resources, pollution, and environmental destruction (Gould, Pellow, & Schnaiberg, 2004; Rudy, *forthcoming*; Schnaiberg, 1980). Amin (2018) also referred to the ecological crisis of the twenty-first century in his final essay. James O'Connor (1988) conceptualized these processes as the 'second contradiction of capitalism', a contradiction in addition to the capitalist crisis of overproduction. In this perspective, advanced forms of capitalist accumulation undermine the necessary material requisites for systemic reproduction by destroying the ecological bases for continuous and expanded industrial activities on a global scale, leading to a crisis of underproduction. More recently, scholars contributing to these debates incorporate carbon emissions and global warming as an 'ecological rift' caused by global capitalism (Foster, Clark, & York, 2011; Moore, 2015).

The most recent scientific reporting suggests that the outlook for continued global warming is dire. Instead of a reduction in carbon emissions since 2017, there was a global increase of 1.6% in 2017 and 2.7% in 2018. (Dennis & Moody, 2018). Moreover, the past four years (2015–2018) have seen the warmest documented mean global temperatures on record, while the twenty warmest years on record have occurred over the past twenty-two years (World Meteorological Organization, 2018). The environmental challenge of global warming and climate change produced by neoliberal capitalism in the twenty-first century has also generated a massive transnational movement – the movement for climate justice. Environmental justice and climate justice combine threats of environmental degradation with concerns about inequality and the larger impacts on people with fewer resources and disadvantaged populations (Bullard, 2005; Pellow, 2017).

Ecological threats provide a major incentive for collective action in that failure to mobilize in the present will likely lead to worsening environmental conditions (Almeida, 2018; Johnson & Frickel, 2011). Earlier conservation movements (often involving more privileged social strata) organized in waves of environmentalism since the late nineteenth century against ecological threats associated with the expansion of industrial capital (Gottlieb, 1993). The movement to resist the environmental threat of climate change traces its origins back to the late 1980s and early 1990s. In the late 1980s, climate scientists and environmental NGOs started to push international organizations and nation states to take action based on meteorological and atmospheric studies that demonstrated a clear trend in global warming and its likely negative consequences. The United Nations established the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) to begin scientific discussions about how to reduce greenhouse gas emissions (Romm, 2018). Concurrently, a global network of environmental NGOs emerged to pressure the U.N. to propose a binding international climate accord – the Climate Action Network (CAN) (Brecher, 2015). During the United Nations Earth Summit on sustainability in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil in 1992, the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) was established as an intergovernmental forum to work on reducing global warming (Caniglia, Brulle, & Szasz, 2015). In 1995, the UNFCCC forum also set up annual meetings to move toward a global climate treaty to decrease carbon emissions – the Conference of Parties (COP). Throughout the 1990s and early 2000s the global climate movement to reduce greenhouse

gases was concentrated in advanced capitalist countries and largely worked through the institutional channels of these U.N. bodies via the participation of environmental NGOs. This period has been referred to as ‘mobilization from above’ (Brecher, 2015).

Beginning in the mid-2000s, the climate justice movement became more contentious, organizing rallies and marches across the globe. The use of more non-institutionalized tactics rose in tandem with the lack of progress within the U.N. system to enforce past agreements and hold countries accountable for CO₂ emissions. Already by 2005 the mass climate justice movement could mobilize simultaneous demonstrations in cities across several continents. The climate justice movement peaked in 2014 and 2015 by holding global days of protest in most of the world’s countries and mobilized another large campaign in September of 2018 (Almeida, 2019). The movement has gained tremendous momentum in 2019 with the rise of Extinction Rebellion and Fridays for the Future promoting hundreds of actions across the globe. This global reach marked the transnational climate justice movement as one of the most extensive social movements on the planet.

The emphasis here is on the organizational infrastructure that has made the transnational climate justice movement so extensive and its prospects for future mobilization and lasting and effective coordination of popular organizations and movements. I examine the role of the global economic justice movement and the anti-war movement in providing the organizational and experiential bases for planetary mobilization against climate change. These are empirically based assessments to understand the likelihood of building a sustained international organization of progressive and subaltern forces along the lines envisioned by Amin (2018).

The global justice movement

The global justice movement took off in the late 1990s shortly after the establishment of the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 1996. The movement quickly developed an innovative organizational template for mobilizing mass protests on a transnational level. The coordinating template involved mobilizing a series of actions at the focal conference/summit/financial meetings while simultaneously holding dozens of solidarity actions across the globe (Almeida & Lichbach, 2003). This transnational organizing model is referred to by activists as a ‘global day of action’ (Wood, 2004). The global justice movement was a response to the neoliberal form of global capitalism that had been taking shape since the 1980s with a heavy emphasis on free trade and deregulation of social protections. The emerging global justice movement began to take advantage of the rise of internet communication technologies (ICTs). Beginning with international financial meetings in Europe in the late 1990s and the 1999 WTO conference in Seattle (Smith, 2001), the global organizational template was widely adopted. Indeed, by the turn of the twenty-first century the global justice movement had organized over 15 transnational campaigns per year with over 200,000 participants (Lichbach, 2003).

The organizational template invented by the global justice movement involves holding a large set of protests at the site of an international event along with simultaneous solidarity protests around the world (Almeida & Lichbach, 2003). By the early 2000s, the global justice movement had expanded the simultaneous protests to every continent. This would become the main form of transnational opposition to global capitalism in the twenty-first century (Wood, 2012). After the WTO meetings in Seattle, at least a half dozen global days of protest took place between 2000 and 2003. These included the IMF/World Bank meetings in Prague in September 2000, the G8 conference in Genoa in 2001, the WTO ministerial in Doha, Qatar in November 2001, and the fifth WTO Ministerial in 2003 in Cancun, Mexico (Juris, 2008). The global justice movement brought a wide coalition

of different groups into their global days of action campaigns – youth, labour unions, human rights, environmentalists, LGBTQ groups, indigenous activists, feminists, peace, anarchists and etc. They united around the idea of protecting social citizenship and environmental rights that had been granted by nation-states in the twentieth century and now were under threat from neoliberal deregulation.

The global justice movement spilled over into the global anti-war movement in 2003 with demonstrations against the U.S. invasion of Iraq¹ and into the climate justice movement by the mid-2000s (Fisher, 2007; Hadden, 2014). At the same time, the issues and networks involved in the global justice movement continued via the World Social Forum process and ongoing mass demonstrations outside G20 meetings, as well as the global day of action in October of 2011 at the height of the Occupy Wall Street campaign. If there is to be a sustained progressive international movement in the twenty-first century it will probably coalesce around the climate justice movement and will further develop and augment the global days of action template.

Networks of transnational activists began to piece together the first Global Days Action to reduce carbon emissions in 2005 and 2006. These global networks came out of the alter-globalization and anti-war movements of the early 2000s to now battle climate change (Bond, 2012). They were joined by coalitions such as the Campaign against Climate Change and the transnational environmental NGOs such as Friends of the Earth and Greenpeace (Foran, 2014). By 2009, the climate justice movement reached 92 nations in the days of global action leading up to COP 15 in Copenhagen with the assistance of more assertive coalitions such as Climate Justice Action and Climate Justice Now! and greater representation from the Global South.² In the 2010s, web-based NGOs such as 350.org and Avaaz took a leadership role as brokers in coordinating the large mobilizations in 2014 and 2015 leading up to the Paris Climate Agreement. The 2014 and 2015 global days of climate action reached up to 75 percent of all countries on the planet with at least 1.5 million participants. Fridays for the Future and Extinction Rebellion are currently sustaining similar campaigns across the globe.

The increasing participation from countries across the world in the transnational climate justice actions, including from the global South, is remarkable. This loosely coupled global infrastructure provides a basis for future rounds of progressive collective action. The next steps for solidifying this infrastructure would be to continue to coordinate global summits and forums with representatives from the participating groups in the global days of action. Past examples of this approach include the World People's Summit on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Earth held in Bolivia in 2010 following the worldwide mobilizations associated with COP 15 (Smith, 2014) and the World Social Forums. The Bolivia Summit called for ecological reparations for the Global South and an immediate and drastic reduction in carbon emissions.

Perhaps most pressing would be to increase the rate of summits and forums that bring together representatives from the climate justice coalition. The impressive scale of the transnational mobilizations over the past ten years is still limited by the vast amount of time between the launching of global days of action campaigns, even though much traditional organizing takes place on the ground in the interim periods. To overcome the 'flash activism' nature of these campaigns and to build the necessary level of solidarity among diverse groups, classes, and sectors for a long-term and capacious anti-systemic movement (Amin, 1990; Ciplet, Timmons Roberts, & Khan, 2015), climate justice activists will need to continue to find avenues and mechanisms for more frequent forums and mobilizations that can maintain and accelerate the momentum of a truly planetary movement.

The increasing intensity of climate change as an existential threat does create relatively more favourable conditions for international unity and avoids the sectarianism and fragmentation discussed by Amin (2018) in previous attempts at building a socialist *internationale* or permanent

global organization of progressive sectors and groups. The threat is imminent and global, providing urgency and aligning common interests, the basic building blocks of sustained collective action (Almeida, 2019). At the same time, a number of pre-existing social and economic divisions will need to be given heightened recognition to build enduring transnational coalitions across the lines of race, class, gender, and colonial status. The environmental justice movement against ecological racism (Bullard, 2005), the Cochabamba Climate Change conference (Bond, 2012), and the current mass mobilizations fostering intersectional alliances (Luna, 2016; Terriquez, Brenes, & Lopez, 2018) offer some of the most promising models to incorporate within the larger global climate justice movement. With global warming disproportionately harming billions of the world's poor and excluded by global capital, the climate justice movement cannot continue to be directed by relatively privileged strata in the global North or South. Chase-Dunn and Reese (2007) also demonstrate that previous progressive parties organized on a global scale were initially able to coordinate simultaneously in the global periphery and capitalist core with membership from a variety of social sectors, including peasants and the urban working-class. The transnational climate justice alliance may also build internal cohesion by mobilizing against the xenophobia, authoritarianism, and climate change deniability of rightwing populism.

Notes

1. One of the largest protests in world history took place on 15 February 2003 against the impending U.S. invasion of Iraq. Nearly 800 cities in eighty countries participated against initiating a war on Iraq using the Global Days of Action template.
2. The terminology of the world-system perspective divides the Global South into the periphery and the semiperiphery.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

Paul Almeida is Professor and the former Chair of Sociology at the University of California, Merced. Almeida's research centres on the efficacy of collective action at the local, national and global levels of social and political life. His articles have appeared in the *American Journal of Sociology*, *Annual Review of Sociology*, *Social Forces*, *Social Problems*, *Mobilization*, and other scholarly outlets. Almeida's books include: *Social movements: The structure of collective mobilization* (University of California Press, 2019); *Mobilizing democracy: Globalization and citizen protest* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014); *Waves of protest: Popular struggle in El Salvador, 1925–2005* (University of Minnesota Press, 2008); *Handbook of social movements across Latin America* (co-edited with Allen Cordero, 2015); and *Latin American social movements: Globalization, democratization and transnational networks* (co-edited with Hank Johnston, 2006). He is a two-time Fulbright Fellowship Recipient and received the 2015 Distinguished Scholarship Award from the Pacific Sociological Association.

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