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Capital has an Internationale and it is going fascist: time for an international of the global popular classes

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ABSTRACT

Global capitalism is approaching a general crisis of capitalist rule. It is urgent to renovate a popular revolutionary project and refound the state if we are to combat the onslaught of the neo-fascist right. Amin's call for a new Internationale is a timely move in that direction, notwithstanding the many challenges of organizing such an Internationale. Developing an umbrella program must engage political and theoretical debate on the nature of the new global capitalism, learn from the failures of Syriza in Greece and the Pink Tide in Latin America, and reconceive the three-way relationship between states, parties, and social movements. The downward mobility and destabilization of working classes in the former First World and the destruction of the old labor aristocracies provides the recruiting grounds for 21st century fascism but also new opportunities for transnational North-South solidarities. A new Internationale must identify and prioritize the class antagonisms within and across countries and regions over core-periphery or Global North-South contradictions.

KEYWORDS

Global capitalism; neo-fascism; transnational capitalist class

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.

Samir Amin's call for an 'Internationale of workers and peoples' could not be timelier. If we are to face the onslaught of the neo-fascist right, the left worldwide must urgently renovate a revolutionary project and a plan for refounding the state. It must do so across borders under an umbrella organization that puts forth a minimum program around which popular and working-class forces can unite, and that establishes mechanisms for transnational struggle. While I concur with much of Amin's call I also have some significant differences as well as specifications with respect to the call that I will attempt to explicate below.

Global capitalism is facing a spiraling crisis of hegemony that appears to be approaching a general crisis of capitalist rule. In the face of this crisis there has been a sharp polarization in global society between insurgent left and popular forces, on the one hand, and an insurgent far right, on the other, at whose fringe are openly fascist tendencies (Robinson, 2019). Yet the far-right has been more effective in the past few years than the left in mobilizing disaffected populations around the world and has made significant political and institutional inroads. It would seem that Rosa Luxemburg's dire warning at the start of the World War I that we face 'socialism or barbarism' is as or even more relevant today than when she issued it, given the magnitude of the means of violence worldwide and the threat of ecological holocaust. If left, popular, and working-class forces are to regain the initiative and beat back barbarism they need a transnational umbrella organization with a minimum program against global capitalism around which they can coordinate national and regional struggles and *transnationalize* the fightback.

The international of capital and the specter of 21st century fascism

The theme of transnational struggles from below has been discussed at great length for several decades now. Capital has achieved a newfound transnational mobility yet labor remains territorially bound by the nation-state. In the wake of the structural crisis of the 1970s, emergent transnational capital went global as a strategy to reconstitute its social power by breaking free of nation-state constraints to accumulation, to do away with Fordist-Keynesian redistributive arrangements, and to beat back the tide of revolution in the Third World.

The corporate class and its agents identified the mass struggles and demands of popular and working classes and state regulation as fetters to its freedom to make profits and accumulate wealth as the rate of profit declined in the 1970s. As an emergent transnational capitalist class (TCC) congealed, it put in place a new transnational corporate order and went on the offensive in its class warfare against working and popular classes. Globalization enhanced the structural power of transnational capital over states and popular classes worldwide. Behind this alleged 'loss of state sovereignty', capitalist globalization changed the correlation of class forces worldwide in favor of the TCC. Transnational capital has been able to exercise a newfound structural power over states and territorially bound working classes, which has undermined the ability of states to capture and redistribute surpluses, and with it, the logic and basis for social democratic projects. This is the backdrop to what Amin identifies as the political neutering of traditional unions and left-wing parties and their organizations.

We should be clear that, despite nationalist and populist rhetoric, the forces of 21st century fascism do not constitute a departure from global capitalism but, to the contrary, their program advances the interests of transnational capital in the face of overaccumulation and stagnation in the global economy, as I have discussed at length elsewhere (see, inter-alia, Robinson, 2014, 2018). The fight against fascism is necessarily a fight against the TCC. The core of 21st century fascism is the triangulation of transnational capital with reactionary and repressive political power in the state and neo-fascist forces in civil society. Emergent 21st century fascist projects are a response to the crisis. Escalating inequalities and the inability of global capitalism to assure the survival of billions of people have thrown states into crises of legitimacy and now push the system towards more openly repressive means of social control and domination that exacerbate political and social conflict and international tensions. Neo-fascist projects are a contradictory attempt to refound state legitimacy under the destabilizing conditions of capitalist globalization.

Trumpism in the United States, Bolsonarism in Brazil, and to varying degrees other far-right movements around the world, represent the extension of capitalist globalization by other means,

namely by an expanding global police state and a neo-fascist mobilization. They seek to create a new balance of political forces in the face of the breakdown of the short-lived global capitalist historic bloc. What is emerging is an Internationale of 21st century fascism. Far-right and neo-fascist groups around the world, for instance, celebrated the October 2018 electoral victory of Brazilian fascist Jair Bolsonaro. Former Trump advisor and neo-fascist organizer Steven Bannon served as an adviser to the Bolsonaro campaign (Telesur, 2018), while Italy's extreme-right interior minister Matteo Salvini declared in an exuberant tweet that was shared by U.S. neo-Nazi leader Richard Spencer that 'even in Brazil, the citizens have sent the left packing'. *The Guardian* of London warned in its headline coverage that 'Trump joy over Bolsonaro suggests new rightwing axis in Americas and beyond' (*The Guardian*, 2018).

Beyond such political agents of a 21st century fascism as Bannon or Salvini, the TCC had banked (literally) on Bolsonaro and was delighted with his victory. As in the United States under Trump, Bolsonaro proposed the wholesale privatization and deregulation of the economy, opening up the amazon to lumber, mining and transnational agribusiness interests, regressive taxation and general austerity, alongside mass repression and criminalization of social movements and vulnerable communities that may oppose this program. As Johnson (2018) noted the day after Bolsonaro's victory, the 'world's capitalists are salivating over the new investment opportunities' that Bolsonaro promises. Capital markets and Brazilian funds spiked on the world's stock exchanges the day after his electoral victory. Here we see the 'wages of fascism' for a global capitalism in crisis.

A new Internationale and a united front against 21st century fascism

The right has drawn on the well-known nationalist, populist, xenophobic, and racist repertoire to channel rising anxieties and transform mass anti-systemic sentiment into support for its neo-fascist program. We should be clear, however, that it has been the inability of the left to confront global capitalism and to put forth a clear leftist alternative that has paved the way for the neo-fascist right. The case of Brazil is particularly indicative. During its 14 years in power the Workers Party courted national and transnational capital, overseeing a dramatic expansion of capitalist globalization in the country (Robinson, 2017). It demobilized the mass movements that had brought it to power and absorbed its leaders into the state. Its renowned social welfare programs depended entirely on mild redistribution during the boom period of high prices for the country's commodities exports. Once the prices collapsed in 2014 and the economy tanked, the far-right, with the backing of the TCC in Brazil and abroad, moved on the offensive (see Fogel, 2018; Robinson, 2017).

The lessons from Brazil, Latin America, the United States, and elsewhere are clear. When faced with the inability of moderate reform to stabilize capitalism or neo-fascism, the political and economic elite will embrace the latter. And when a program of mild reform alongside capitalist globalization fails to resolve the plight of masses of people, some of these masses will embrace the fascist alternative. This is why the new Internationale that Amin calls for must stake out a clear position in frontal attack against global capitalism.

These lessons have been particularly painful in Latin America, where the Pink Tide (left turn) starting in the new century raised great hopes and expectations. As has now been discussed at some length by many, myself included, the left in state power (with the partial exception of Venezuela and, to a lesser extent, Bolivia) did not undertake structural transformations; it did not challenge the prevailing property relations and class structure. Social assistance programs depended on the whims of the global market controlled by the TCC. When the price of the region's commodities exports collapsed, starting in 2011, the left lost the very basis for its mildly reformist project.

The popular masses were clamoring for more substantial transformations. But under the pretext of attracting transnational corporate investment to bring about development, the demands from below for deeper transformation were often suppressed. Social movements were demobilized, their leaders absorbed by the institutional left in government and the capitalist state, and their mass bases subordinated to the left parties' electoralism. There is now an evident disjuncture throughout Latin America between mass social movements that are at this time resurgent, and the institutional and party left that is losing power and influence by the day. This disjuncture must be closed and the relationship between political organizations and social movements needs to be clarified as part of the work of a new Internationale.

Here is where we need a new Internationale that puts forth a unified minimal program coordinated across borders and across regions. The World Social Forum (WSF) explicitly rejected a political program and thus contributed to the separation of left political parties from mass social movements. For a fightback to be successful, we need to build a united front against fascism and a program around which such a united front can be organized. Infighting within the ruling groups is escalating as the global capitalist historic bloc constructed in the heyday of neo-liberalism from the 1990s until the financial collapse of 2008 now unravels (more broadly, the whole post-WWII international system is collapsing, but that is a discussion to take up elsewhere). Such infighting may present opportunities for the popular classes to build broad political alliances in the struggle against fascism.

Historically such fronts have subordinated the left to the reform-oriented and 'democratic' bourgeoisie. This time around, in my view, any strategy of broad anti-fascist alliances must foreground a clear and sharp analysis of global capitalism and its crisis and strive for popular and working-class forces to exercise their hegemony over such alliances. For this we need an Internationale with a program. Amin notes that such an Internationale would require several years before giving any tangible results. We should not be under any illusions that a new Internationale as called for by Amin will be free of conflict. All to the contrary, we will push forward in the midst of sharp debate among many different and even antagonistic positions. In the real course of history this is inevitable.

The challenge of Amin's call for an Internationale of workers and peoples

But the construction of programs must also involve debate over the analysis of global capitalism that is at once political and theoretical. It is here that I have significant disagreements with Amin. He correctly, in my view, notes the extreme concentration of capital worldwide and the centralization of power. However, I disagree with his confused insistence on a territorial (rather than a class/social) concentration of that capital and power, and with his insistence on a 'triad' (United States, Europe, Japan) framework that ignores the worldwide transnationalization of capital and the rise of powerful contingents of the TCC in the former Third World.

Amin is blind-sighted by his nation-state/triad framework. It is illustrative anecdotally that the most recent report issued by the Swiss bank UBS on the world's rich notes that most of the world's billionaires are in the United States but the number of ultra-wealthy people is growing fastest throughout Asia. In China, which now accounts for one in five of the world's billionaires, two new billionaires are minted every week (Neate, 2018). China's economic role in Africa, Asia, and Latin America now appears structurally the same as the traditional triad countries. Brazilian, Mexican, Indian, Saudi, Egyptian, and other capitalists who belong to the TCC now also invest worldwide in these same structures, including extensive investment *in* the triad countries. Another report by *Forbes* noted that wealth is growing faster among the super-rich in the former Third World than

elsewhere. ‘Between 2012 and 2017, Bangladesh saw its ultra-rich club grow by 17.3%’, it noted. ‘Over the same time period, growth in China was 13.4% while in Vietnam it was 12.7%. Kenya and India were among the other nations recording double-digit growth of 11.7 and 10.7% respectively. The U.S. came tenth overall for UHNWI [ultra-high net worth individuals] population growth at 8.1% from 2012 to 2017’ (McCarthy, 2018). Amin is simply wrong when he asserts that ‘the oligarchs of the triad are the only ones that count’.

Amin’s tenacious nation-state/interstate framework of analysis of world political dynamics ignores both the ‘Thirdworldization’ of significant sectors of the First World working classes and the rise of TCC contingents in the former Third World that are now globally active and part of the global investor class. It is in fact the downward mobility and destabilization of working classes in the former First World, the destruction of the old labor aristocracies, that provides the recruiting grounds for 21st century fascism *but also* establishes fertile new opportunities for transnational North-South solidarities (yet another reason why Amin’s call for a new Internationale is so urgent).

These are not merely analytical or theoretical differences. They have political implications insofar as we must banish any lingering illusions about a ‘progressive’ or ‘nationalist’ bourgeoisie in the former Third World with which one could ally against global capital. There may have been one in the bygone era of colonialism and the heyday of national liberation struggles in the 20th century but the interests of the leading contingents of capital and their political representatives in the former Third World now lie in the defense and consolidation of global capitalism. The ‘re-colonization’ of the world by what Amin refers to as the ‘collective imperialism’ of the triad countries is in actuality a re-colonization by transnational capital, by the TCC, not by some nation-states of other nation-states, notwithstanding that the most powerful contingents of the TCC are still located in the old triad countries and now in China as well.

The worldwide struggle from below of a new Internationale – which *must be simultaneously national and transnational* – must identify and prioritize the class antagonisms within and across countries and regions over core-periphery or Global North-South contradictions, *even though* these latter contradictions are still very much relevant, if increasingly secondary. The irony is that Amin’s ‘triad against the Global South’ framework of analysis is in direct contradiction with his entirely correct assertion that ‘the possibility of substantial progressive reforms of capitalism in its current stage is only an illusion’.

Of course, the First, Second, Third, and Fourth Internationals were all umbrella international organizations for socialist political parties, whereas the WSF prohibited political parties from participating. I concur fully with Amin that we need to ‘establish a new Organization and not just a “movement” or a ‘discussion forum’. At this time, in my view, it is necessary for a new Internationale to incorporate both social movements and left political organizations and parties. This is to say that a new Internationale would be quite distinct from the first four and also from the WSF, which was an international of social movements only. Commitment to a ‘minimum program’ and to joining forces around such a program with political parties may be tough for social movements to swallow. It is absolutely true that the vanguardist model of revolution in the 20th century (as an aside – this was less due to Lenin’s approach than to a fetishization of that approach) involved control of social movements from below by political parties that sought to snuff out their autonomy, and moreover, that some left political organizations in and out of the state in the new century continue to seek such control over social movements from below.

Clearly, a new Internationale must put forth a model of revolutionary struggle in which social movements from below exercise complete autonomy from political parties and from states that may be captured by such parties. If the Left attempts to control or place brakes on mass mobilization

and on autonomous social movements from below, if it suppresses the demands of the popular masses in the name of ‘governance’ or electoral strategies, it will be betraying what it means to be left. It is only such mobilization from below that can impose a counterweight to the control that transnational capital and the global market exercise from above over capitalist states around the world.

Finally, any new Internationale will have to deal with the matter of elections and of the capitalist state. We have learned that subordinating the popular agenda to winning elections will only set us up for defeat even if we must participate in electoral processes when possible and expedient. But we have also learned from recent experience of Syriza in Greece and the Pink Tide governments in Latin America, as well as social democratic governments that came to office around the world in the late 20th century, that once a left force wins government office (which is *not the same as state power ... state power is imposed structurally by transnational capital*) it is tasked with administering the capitalist state and its crisis and is pushed into defending that state and its dependence on transnational capital for its reproduction, which places it at odds with the same popular classes and social movements that brought it to power.

There is no ready solution to this (these) dilemma(s). But certainly, a new Internationale of workers and peoples that entails ‘an actual organization with statutes and a renovated socialist project’ is integral to a solution. Amin is right that ‘we are now in the phase of the ‘autumn of capitalism’ without this being strengthened by the emergence of ‘the people’s spring’ and a socialist perspective.’

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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