FORUM ON SAMIR AMIN'S PROPOSAL FOR A NEW INTERNATIONAL OF WORKERS AND PEOPLES

***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'](#) to coordinate support to progressive movements. To honor Samir Amin's invaluable contribution to world-systems scholarship, we are pleased to present our 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](#), the [Journal of World-Systems Research](#), and [Pambazuka News](#). Readers can find additional essays and commentary in these outlets. The following essay has been published in [Globalizations](#) and is being reproduced here with permission.*

The Fifth *International*: International or Global?

Owen Worth
University of Limerick
owen.worth@ul.ie

The deaths of Samir Amin and Bob Cox in 2018 saw two giants from the left depart the stage at a time when the world order; which they did so much to provide a basis for which to study, is in a state of flux. Heavily involved with the workings of the World Social Forum, it is no surprise then that some of Samir Amin's last contributions were to call for a new or 'fifth' *International* (Amin, 2018;2019). In light of what Amin saw as the abandonment of anti-capitalist struggles in the north in favour of communitarianism and of anti-imperialist struggle in the south in favour of capitalist development, an *International* was required for the left to tackle the global capitalist system in a manner that is both strategic and coherent. Whilst I firmly agree with the premise of a new *International*, I question the form that Amin seems to suggest it should take in regards to

confronting the world order. Rather than returning to the logistics of national components, such a body should be geared towards global goals which move beyond the aspirations of 20th century socialism. In doing so, it is apt to remind ourselves of the contribution that Rosa Luxemburg made during the second *International*, particular as it this year witnesses the century anniversary of her tragic death.

Amin's understanding of the neoliberal world order was such that 'globalisation' was seen as a form of imperialism and should be understood in the same manner that traditional 19th century forms of Imperialism had been. The United States, the European Union and East Asia thus represent a 'triad' of Imperialist entities that have managed a world capitalist system reliant upon the exploitation and commodification of resources (Amin, 2018). The expanding global market that has epitomised the nature of globalisation is one that has been upheld by the ruling classes within this triad, led, but not necessarily dominated by the US. As such, a co-ordinated form of internationalism is needed to confront the structures of the contemporary order in a manner that goes far beyond the 'open-confines' inherent within the World Social Forum (WSF, 2007). This form of internationalism would need to commit towards a set of strategic actions that can formally bring together the constellation of socialist and labour organisations across the world in the manner that bonded the international organisations of the 19th and 20th century. In light of the lack of practical strategic thinking from the left in terms of confronting the neoliberal order, this 'call for arms' should be commended. By providing an institutional space where transformative politics can be nurtured, the problems of coherence and fragmentation that have dodged the building of any alternative hegemonic opposition in the neoliberal age can potentially be addressed (Worth, 2013). We are still left to wonder what form such a body would take, and, going forward, how such an idea of 'internationalism' would be understood and realised in terms of its role in confronting capitalism. It is here where Amin's own understanding of the term runs into problems.

Which Internationalism?

The notion of internationalism is one that contains several meanings and has different connotations depending on how it is applied and understood. Amin's own use of the term appeared to be one which resembled a traditional form of the *inter*-national. That is that the nation-state remains the prime location for socialism to be built, through the premise of popular democracy and sovereignty. Rather than an attempt to construct a global polity or alternatively a form of world government per se, this suggests that the nation-state itself provides the space where a collection of nationally-specific projects can be forged. The role of any international system here would thus be to facilitate solidarity and partnerships between these respective parts. This was indeed very much the form taken through the building of 20th Century Socialism (Glaser and Walker, 2007).

Amin's attacks on the European Union and indeed his defence of the nation-state in terms of facilitating certain forms of popular sovereignty (2016) would suggest that he favoured this traditional approach. Yet, at the same time, Amin's understanding of internationalism is one whereby the respective sovereign parts of the world system require different roles in order to contest its character. Whilst Amin does stress the need for 'sovereign projects' he also suggests

that these entail different meanings, dependent upon where they are developed. Within the triad, he believes that the nation-state should re-assert their sovereignty so they can embark upon forms of nationalisation programmes common within 20th century social democracy as a means of reducing the influence of global capital. He also adds that in the South, regional organisations such as ASEAN, ALBA[1] or more substantially the BRICS are better placed to challenge the system (Amin, 2014). In this way, Amin is consistent with his notable earlier work, seen in classics such as *Unequal Exchange*, where he suggested that any means of disrupting the imperialist workings of the world system as a whole would lead to its potential collapse (Amin, 1976).

As a result, Amin welcomed the Brexit result as he believed this was a symptom of the implosion of a European project, which had emerged as a key lynch-pin of the Euro-American Imperialist system (Amin, 2016). More prominently here, he also attacked accusations that those who criticised the EU from the position of national sovereignty were 'nationalist' in nature and furthermore suggested that the only left-wing response to the EU from groups within Europe currently available was indeed to retreat back to the level of the nation-state (Amin, 2016). It is here where Amin's *inter*nationalism perhaps becomes more prominent and his overall vision of an international movement becomes quite limited in its outlook. For whilst, on one level, it is understandable - particularly when viewed from the position of the South - that the EU is understood entirely through the lens of an imperialist construct, it provides an analysis which is reductionist to a point which underplays the transformative potential that might emerge from it. This point is not meant to re-play the familiar arguments over whether or not the EU has the potential to provide a vehicle for transformative social change or that as a neoliberal construction it cannot be reformed (see for example the recent debates between Streeck and Habermas, 2014), which is not for debate here. Instead, it is to stress that by going back to the model of the nation-state as the main component for internationalism, a departure from the ontological confines inherent within dialectical materialism is evident. Yet Amin appears quite adamant in his belief that as the globalisation of the contemporary era is reminiscent of the globalisation of classical Imperialism, then a response needs to emerge from within similar national processes at it did in the late nineteenth and twentieth century (Amin, 2013). In this sense, rather than looking beyond twentieth century national sovereignty in order to transcend capitalism, a reversion back to such existing national frameworks are preferable.

Amin's understanding of internationalism is thus one which follows the premise of 'left nationalism' that became the hallmark of the different forms of post-war European Socialist and Social Democratic Parties of the 20th century. Likewise, whilst his own work both academically and practically within the WSF did much to stress the importance of non-state groups, from peasant revolts to International NGO campaigning, he still stressed that in the core triad, national strategies still remained the best chance to rupture the workings of the international capitalist system. This appears in contrast to the aspirations of the global justice movements and to the spirit of radical

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[1] It should be pointed out that this was written prior to ALBA's (The Bolivarian Alliance for the Americas) disintegrating due to the economic collapse in Venezuela and the withdrawal from the group of Ecuador.

global civil society It also seems less receptive of ideas such as cosmopolitan democracy and the idea of transformation at the global level, which have made up much understanding of how internationalism in the 21ˢᵗ century is perceived (Kalder, 2004; Held, 2001; Patomaki and Teivainen, 2004). At the same time, the substantial body of work associated with autonomous and 'open' Marxist has been quick to point to how struggles can be won within civil society through disrupting forms of production in different ways (Bailey et al, 2017). The most significant demonstration of this was from Holloway's account of the Zapatistas uprisings in Mexico in 1994 in light of the NAFTA regime coming into effect. The premise here being that the contestation of the neoliberal system can be successfully made without the need of a formal political victory at the centre of power (Holloway, 2002). Indeed, if the last few decades have shown us anything, it has been that national strategies have been undermined both by transformations to global society from above the state and by radical forms of localism from below.

Perhaps the most significant shortcoming of understanding an internationalist strategy around a traditional collection of national struggles – or as an *inter*national one- is in terms of wider ambition. This can certainly be seen within the European context. Whilst a critique of Euro-centrism remains central to any international project geared towards resisting the confines of the present system, the idea that European nation-states need to retreat back into their national shells in order to re-group remains highly problematic from both a practical and a historical sense. It also represents a dangerous precedent. For whilst the rise of the far right is discussed and taken seriously by many urging for the return of national strategies, the very move towards national self-determination itself adds to the environment that allows it to flourish. This becomes especially the case within states across Europe. For, whilst post-colonial nationalist struggles looked to forge forms of nationalism which seek to reject international exploitation, its form in Europe has been so intrinsically linked to Imperialism that it becomes unwise to engage in its structure content, no matter how it might be ideologically constructed (Anderson, 1991).

There have of course been several accounts that seek to demonstrate how nationalism and Marxism are not as incompatible as sometimes portrayed (Munck, 1986; Nimni, 1991) and several more that are quick to remind us that the very nature of internationalism is based on the construction of national variations of socialism (Lewis, 2000). Yet, the problem with all forms of nationalism, no matter how 'progressive' they appear, is that by their very nature they promote divisions which lead to tensions between respective nation-states. These divisions inevitably lead to the potential for clashes between states that have historically been marked by conflicts (Ryan and Worth, 2010). More substantially, they reduce the potential of wider international solidarity as strategies retreat back to the confines of the national, neglecting wider struggles in favour of those drawn out at a national level (Radice, 2000). Thus, whilst it might appear feasible to suggest that national strategies placed within a wider international framework can confront and oppose international capitalism, the mechanism of popular sovereignty to achieve this remains highly problematic and limits any potential to move beyond the confines of the Westphalian state-system.

Luxemburg and Internationalism

The form of how internationalism should be expressed within the socialist movement was discussed in earnest in the first decades of the 20th century. In the Second *International*, Rosa Luxemburg provided one of the most devastating and powerful criticisms of national self-determination that there has ever been. Arguing against Lenin, she insisted that any form of sovereign right to self-rule would lead to fragmentation that would weakness the struggle against international capitalism. She also condemned any form of nationalism as a tool used by the bourgeoisie in order to divide the proletariat (Luxemburg, 1976). From a wider ontological perspective, Luxemburg saw the nation-state as the distinct product of capitalism and believed that by limiting strategy around one of its key institutional components, it restricts the potential to move beyond it (Luxemburg, 1986). Thus, for Luxemburg, the whole notion of dialectical materialism should be understood not through the development of existing structures but as a process where new structures emerge and develop over time. Likewise, Internationalism should not be something restricted by structures of the present, nor by pre-existing norms such as national sovereignty, but instead be understood as a mechanism that could move beyond the confines of the present towards the realms of the 'possible' (Worth, 2012).

One hundred years after her death, Luxemburg's understanding of dialectical materialism is far more relevant in the contemporary era of globalisation than it was in the first decades of the twentieth century when nationalism was so significant within every realm of European politics. Even during the debates between Lenin and Luxemburg at the time, Lenin did concede that many of Luxemburg's fears were relevant. Lenin favoured large national multi-cultural units in order to address ethnic divisions and prevent fragmentation from occurring (Davis, 1976).

The move in world politics in the 21st century towards regionalism sees a greater opportunity for such spatial developments to grow. Therefore, any move that seems to support a retreat back to smaller units based upon sovereign self-determination would appear regressive, even to those at the time that rejected Luxemburg's critiques of nationalism. In addition, the events that followed the Second *International* – the failures of the Soviet forms of 'real' or 'state' socialism, the self-destructive pursuit of post-colonial nationalism and the stagnation of European social democratic forms of left nationalism – have all showed us that Luxemburg was correct in many of her assertions. In particular, the belief that national self-determination, by its very nature, creates divisions which are unable to contain would appear to have been proved correct in many respects. This is not to say that self-determination was central to the overriding failure of 20th century socialism, but that by insisting upon the principles of national sovereignty and self-autonomy, the flames of nationalism become stoked to a level that division takes precedence over unity.

In light of recent phenomena such as the sovereign debt crisis and the Brexit vote, it is understandable that any form of internationalism would look to locate itself back within a national-first understanding of *inter*nationalism. Yet, Rosa Luxemburg's criticisms within the Second *International* show just how such a move both negates an awareness of dialectics in terms of emancipatory potential. and allows for the re-creation of division (Luxemburg, 1971; 1976). In the current era, geo-political developments such as transnational civil movements, regionalism and

socio-cultural globalisation might have been shaped and forged by a transnational capitalist class, overwhelmingly located in the 'triad', intent upon building and consolidating a neoliberal capitalism (van der Pijl, 1998). Yet, the struggles against them have moved far beyond the realm of the nation-state to a degree that any potential fifth *International* would require the need to create a framework that moves beyond the configuration of 20th century national units and towards global confrontation.

In the light of Brexit, many others have also stressed the need to return to the mechanism of national sovereignty as the main instrument for confronting neoliberalism (Mitchell and Fazi, 2017; Lapavitsas, 2018; Whyman, 2018). Using the logic of Luxemburg, we see the same potential problems related to division and potential fragmentation emerge that has daunted the socialist movement before. For example, if Germany, France or indeed in this instance, the UK were to revert to national specific bodies as a means of countering, opposing and in due course replacing the EU, then why shouldn't their respective parts fragment further? This has particular relevance to the UK, which like the EU, was built upon Imperial ambition and where both Scotland and Wales, and well as perhaps the City of London might look to assert their own right of self-determination and popular sovereignty. Likewise, on the same basis, as Germany was unified on an Imperialist ambition, would it have to fragment into smaller units as it was prior to its independence in order to move forward? As I stressed earlier, back in the Second *International*, Lenin and his allies conceded these concerns were real urging against any fragmentation through the formation of larger units (Davis, 1976). Yet, here we see the opposite. Ultimately we have a suggestion for an *International* where its parts look toward disintegrating from larger units to re-asset their sovereign right as nation-states in order to combine towards a greater unified goal. These are obstacles that are evident before we even look at the institutional requirements that would underpin such an *International*.

Conclusion

I sincerely believe that some form of a new *International* is required in order to confront the dynamics of the neoliberal order, one that is particularly geared towards its ideological contestation. In this respect Amin's call for a renewal of Internationalism should be welcomed. I also believe that Amin's critiques of the north from the perspective of the south are vital to any understanding of the workings of global capitalism. In addition and of far more importance here, he is correct in in his assessment that socialism in the north was very quick to disregard internationalism when it suited them in the second half of the Twentieth Century (Amin, 2013: 121-122). The idea that international alliances are formed and that strategies are devised whereby representatives are geared towards different objectives depending on their positioning within global productivity is also an important one.

It is the form that such an *International* should take that concerns me however. Alongside his argument that the best means to attack the system is through disintegration, Amin is keen to stress the importance of popular struggles and sovereignty as a means of achieving this. Whilst in the south, there are several ways in which this can be achieved, he suggests that in the north, this

means the return to the confines of the nation-state and ultimately to the premise of 'left nationalism'. If this results in an international where individual states reside behind the protection of sovereignty and self-determination, then any wider unity will be undermined. Rather than detract from transnational developments that have emerged from the social reproduction of globalisation, any future international needs to be ordered at the global level and upon global innovations. Retreating back to the sanitary of the nation-state will merely weaken any potential to build an alternative world order. One hundred years on from her brutal murder by the side of a Berlin canal, Rosa Luxemburg's testament on the follies of nationalism remain as important as ever.

About the Author: Dr. Owen Worth works in the Department of Politics and Public Administration at the University of Limerick. His recent book, *Morbid Symptoms: The Global Rise of the Far Right* has been published by Zed Books (2019). He is also the author of *Rethinking Hegemony* (Palgrave, 2015), *Resistance in the Age of Austerity* (Zed Books, 2013) and *Hegemony, International Political Economy and Post Communist Russia* (Ashgate, 2005) and has written numerous articles in and around the area of Global Politics.

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