

Eurocentrism, state-centrism and sexual self-determination in the construction of a global democratic organization

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ABSTRACT

Based on conversations with and publications of Samir Amin, the article explores connections between his ideas on global political strategy and sexual self-determination. One of the questions is about struggles related to homosexuality in Africa. To what extent did he believe that some of the demands for sexual self-determination, including certain forms of feminism and LGBT rights, were so overly embedded in Eurocentrism that they were not fully suitable for popular struggles in many parts of the Global South? The question is framed in the context of state-centric conceptions of the political. Even if some of the analysis includes a critical tone toward his strategical options, it also highlights the continuing importance of Samir Amin as a point of reference for future struggles to create transnational and global instruments for democratic transformations.

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.

My first encounter with Samir Amin was through his texts in the late 1980s when I spent time at Binghamton University in the United States exploring debates about the capitalist world-system. Later, I have often used, and continue to use, his insightful analyses of Eurocentrism and his proposal to build a new organization, a Fifth International, in my classes in Finland and in Latin America.

During that time, I was particularly impressed by the books that Samir had written together with other members of the 'Gang of Four' that also included Giovanni Arrighi, Immanuel Wallerstein and Andre Gunder Frank. The books explored their coinciding interpretations of capitalism and social movements, but the most interesting chapters were the ones in which they laid out their divergences. In his own memory of Samir, Wallerstein (2018) said that of the four, Samir and him agreed the most. One difference between the four was about conquering state power, which Samir considered more advantageous for the struggles than his co-authors.

When I talked with Samir about these divergences, one particular comment seemed to make some of them clearer to me. We both agreed that Wallerstein was, and remains, one of the most important and insightful social scientists in the world. When I asked about where their theoretical and political differences might reside, Samir half-jokingly responded, after various caveats that expressed his basic agreements with a dear long-time friend: 'Do you know what my main problem with Immanuel is? He was never a communist'.

Compared to most intellectuals of his generation, Samir radiated politicizing energy that motivated him and many others to participate actively in multiple initiatives to realize the dreams that they mostly shared. 'Communist' is one expression he used to describe the roots of that motivation, though always making clear that one should not get stuck in dogmatic interpretations of the tradition. His communism and Marxism were explicitly rooted in the Global South, [1] focusing not only on the classical figure of the workers but emphatically also on the struggles of the peasants. For him, Western Marxism was a 'Marxism of the debating chamber and the university, with no social impact' (Amin, Arrighi, Frank, & Wallerstein, 1990; Amin, S., Arrighi, G., Frank, A. G., & Wallerstein, I. (1990), p. 135).

In order to honor Samir's memory as a public intellectual who did not shy away from debates, even with comrades, let me offer a few personal memories that highlight some aspects of his important work among social movements and also open some critical questions that may be useful for further debates about his legacy. The critical questions are about two seemingly different issues: state-centrism and struggles for sexual self-determination. In a sense, however, they are both about the meaning of the political.

In the early 2000s, I got to know Samir in person through various conversations and debates in the World Social Forum (WSF) and its International Council where he represented the World Forum for Alternatives. I always found him to be kind, generous and intellectually honest. His sense of humor was charming and disarming.

At the beginning of the WSF process, Samir thought that it should provide a forum for the creation of a 'global civil front' (see e.g. Amin, 2002). During the first forums in Porto Alegre, Brazil, Samir and I sometimes chatted and agreed on the importance of the Assembly of Social Movements as a 'legitimate trick', as Samir would sometimes call it, to create a political space within the WSF.

The WSF was, and continues to be, trapped in various dilemmas of being an open space that does not aim to become an organization that takes stands and calls for specific political actions. As is clear in Samir's later calls for a Fifth International, he emphasized the need for an Organization with a capital O. The Assembly of Social Movements that gathered inside the WSF events seemed like a possible solution to these dilemmas. Without claiming to represent the WSF as a whole, it consisted of movement organizations that would make various kinds of declarations and calls for action. In our conversations, Samir emphasized that the Assembly of Social Movements was the best available possibility to transgress the self-imposed limitations of the WSF Charter of Principles regarding political action.

Over the years, however, the role of the Assembly of Social Movements lost momentum inside the WSF. The reasons include the fear that some of the founders of the WSF, including most prominently Francisco Whitaker from Brazil, expressed about the Assembly of Social Movements wanting to 'hijack' the WSF process. For Whitaker, the WSF should remain a 'square without an owner', and attempts to transform it toward anything resembling an Organization were suspicious. As the Assembly of Social Movements became less visible, Samir grew increasingly frustrated with the WSF. My understanding is that Samir felt his warnings about the WSF being a 'mere discussion forum' or a 'bazaar' were ignored.

In 2006, the main event of the WSF that, until then, had been an annual gathering organized in one place, was for the first time organized in three different places on different continents. One of them was Caracas. During the Caracas WSF I was sitting with the Peruvian feminist scholar-activist Virginia Vargas and some other friends in the lobby of the hotel where the main activities took place. We were talking about how the political dimension of the forum should be understood.

The WSF had often been accused of not walking the walk, but simply talking the talk. Samir's conception of the WSF as a bazaar-like discussion forum had been one expression of the criticism. We thought that while the criticism was in many ways appropriate, there was something that it did not fully capture.

Three years earlier the biggest simultaneous street mobilizations in the history of the humankind had taken place during the global anti-war protests of February 2003. The social forums had played an important role in bringing about these protests. Yet, the WSF as a whole had never issued a statement against the U.S. invasion of Iraq. In this sense, the WSF had been walking the walk without talking the talk. Perhaps there was something innovative in the WSF method of not aiming to produce unified old-style declarations, but rather creating possibilities for political action to emerge out of its multiple meetings. Should the WSF become more political by strengthening these mechanisms of emergence, or should it become a more unified vanguard, perhaps in articulation with states that would resemble what Samir called a national popular construction?

During our Caracas coffee-table conversation, Samir walked by. He stopped to converse with us for a while and seemed to at least partially agree that new forms of doing politics might be emerging. Then he realized he had to leave. 'I have a meeting with Hugo Chávez', he said, and added smilingly: 'politics, you know'.

At that moment, during the peak period of the 'Pink Tide' Latin American left-leaning governments, the idea of allying the forum with these governments was gaining adherents among many forum participants. It was seen as a possibility that the WSF could finally become political. Others, including some around our table from the organization *Articulación Feminista Marcosur*, were skeptical and thought the WSF should keep more distance from these governments and focus on creating more autonomous options for becoming political. The debate was, or is, not merely about the desirability of a global political organization. It was more about different ways of prioritizing certain conceptions of the political. In Samir's 'politics, you know', articulating with state power seemed to be a key aspect of the political for the movements.

During that time, people with Samir's generational experience often referred to memories of Bandung. The Bandung Conference in 1955 had been a meeting of Asian and African political leaders. It had created great enthusiasm for a southern front of progressive states, many of which soon gained independence in Africa, that could change the world.

By the 1970s, some of this enthusiasm had faded away. Attempts to transform the rules of international organizations and the world-economy through concerted actions by a majority of the member states of the United Nations were met with strategies that transferred decision-making power to institutions using wealth-based systems of rule. During the 1980s, the powers of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank were increased. Transnational corporations started playing an even more prominent role than before. South-based state-centric strategies for creating a more democratic world-system lost momentum. The emergence of the global justice protest movements and the World Social Forum at the turn of the millennium were one expression of a less state-centric approach.

Around 2006, ideals of Bandung had made a partial come-back. Beyond their differences, the

government of Lula in Brazil and Chávez in Venezuela, together with other, mainly Latin American left-leaning governments such as that of the recently elected Evo Morales in Bolivia, reanimated these ideals. As made explicit in the concluding chapter of *Transforming the Revolution*, compared to many of his scholarly comrades such as Arrighi, Frank and Wallerstein, Samir had already earlier made a more optimistic assessments about the benefits of conquering state power (Amin et al., [1990](#), p. 183).

In Samir's analyses of the importance of national and popular construction of states, there is some similarity with Ernesto Laclau's conception of populism. Samir himself recognized this in his article 'The Democratic Fraud and the Universalist Alternative' in which he referred to Laclau's 'solid arguments that I will very largely make my own' (Amin, [2011](#)). In the 1970s' debates on the nature of capitalism, Laclau was often considered to be opposed to the analyses of the world-economy made by Samir and the other members of the world-system school. At least in the case of Samir, the emergence of the left-leaning states in Latin America in the first decade of this century made some of these differences seem minor.

Samir's politics was by no means simply state-centric. He was also a true organic intellectual of the social movements. In 2006, one of the polycentric WSF events was organized in Bamako, Mali. Before the forum, a statement of intellectuals and social movement activists known as the *Bamako Appeal* ([2006](#)) was published and debated. It included an impressive list of demands that ranged from democratic control of the media to democratizing international institutions. It remains one of the boldest attempts of this century to synthesize various themes and demands that had been present in more scattered form in the WSF events until then. Samir and the Belgian liberation theologian François Houtard were the most visible architects of that creation, in tandem with various social movements. The appeal appeared almost exactly half a century after the Bandung Conference and it was often considered an attempt to create a 'new Bandung'.

Reading through the Bamako Appeal, I was impressed by how elegantly some of the multiple demands could be articulated together. I was also wondering about one particular omission, compared to the themes that were visible in the debates of the WSF and the global justice movements. Sexual diversity and demands for LGBT rights were missing. After all, for many WSF participants they had become an inseparable part of the multiplicity of demands. A decision not to highlight these demands in such an important document made me wonder.

In the WSF 2007 that was organized in Nairobi I participated in a panel with François Houtard. I asked him about the invisibility of gay rights in the Bamako Appeal. He responded that they had simply forgotten about it. Later, during the International Council meeting of the WSF in Nairobi, I asked Samir the same question. He gave a much longer answer, referring to the sensitivities of the Africans around homosexuality and how this meant that the theme could not be emphasized in a document produced in Africa.

We continued with a discussion about Eurocentrism and homosexuality in Africa. The president of Zimbabwe and a former hero of the national liberation struggles, Robert Mugabe, had famously argued that homosexuality was un-African. I mentioned the view according to which the most un-African thing about the Mugabe position was perhaps the colonial education that Mugabe himself had received, embedded with Victorian values about sexuality. Half-jokingly I asked Samir whether their appeal also had a Victorian dimension. Kind as always, he laughed. I wish we could still continue the conversation.

It seems clear to me that Samir was not opposed to rights of sexual self-determination. He repeatedly emphasized personal liberation as one dimension of a desirable future. He did condemn the 'liberal virus' and its celebration of diversity. When he spoke of the related belief that the

established system allows 'the flourishing of the individual', he added, in parenthesis, that it really does not allow it (Amin, [2011](#)). Nevertheless, there are parts of his work that may help make the invisibility of sexual self-determination and LGBT rights in the Bamako Appeal understandable.

In an analysis of the social movements in the periphery, Samir expressed some doubts about the ways that feminist and other contemporary movements sometimes approached family traditions (Amin et al., [1990](#), pp. 133-134, for a feminist critique of Samir's earlier ideas see Harris, [1992](#)). He clearly spelled out that the overall impact of feminism was 'supremely progressive'. At the same time, in somewhat ambiguous sentences, he mentioned the risk of reinforcing 'negative attitudes toward popular national demands, like family-centeredness'. He associated this family-centeredness most strongly with the 'Confucian world', but my understanding is that he saw it as something relevant also in many parts of Africa. In the same text, he connected this negative attitude toward family-centeredness with 'the illusion of being able to do without the state level in the transformation of reality'.

It remains unclear to me to what extent this means that such demands that can seem to be in contradiction with family values might be, in Samir's interpretation, in contradiction with the task of moving toward construction of popular national states. My hypothesis, based on his texts and our conversations, is that he thought that some of the demands for sexual self-determination, including certain forms of feminism and LGBT rights, were so overly embedded in Eurocentrism that they were not fully suitable for popular struggles in many parts of the Global South.

It is obviously true that there exist contradictions between demands for sexual self-determination and important tendencies in popular cultures. This happens in most areas of the world-system and can surely be particularly relevant in some countries of the Global South. In this sense, Samir's description of these contradictions cannot be simply considered erroneous. The political usefulness of responding to these contradictions by leaving some struggles unattended in proposals to create civic fronts or new internationals is, however, more debatable (see e.g. Teivainen, [2016](#)).

Shortly before his death, Samir wrote another version of his calls for a new global political Organization (Amin, [2018](#)). He emphasized the 'inadequacy of the struggles being carried out by the victims of the system'. In his listing of weaknesses of the struggles, the first weakness was 'the extreme fragmentation of the struggles, whether at the local or world level, which are always specific and conducted in particular places and subject-matters (ecology, women's rights, social services, community demands, etc.)'. He warned about 'separating the defense of specific rights from the general fight against capitalism'.

In the movements for sexual self-determination, there are certainly tendencies that could not be comfortably considered parts of a broader anti-capitalist political organization. The same goes for a multitude of other movements. Environmentalism was another example sometimes mentioned by Samir. The World Social Forum has been a space where different concerns and struggles can meet and search for possibilities of political articulation and mutual learning. At least in some formal sense, the groups that participate in the forum already subscribe to the broad ideological guidelines of the WSF Charter of Principles, even if many may never have read it. According to the Charter, the forum participants are opposed to 'domination of the world by capital and any form of imperialism'.

Therefore, when we analyze presences and absences of struggles in calls for construction of global political organizations that are made with at least some linkage to the World Social Forum, one should not assume that some of the struggles are by definition so devoid of any anti-capitalist or anti-imperialist potential that they are made absent. As the *Bamako Appeal* was at least in some ways produced in the context of the World Social Forum, this kind of absence can be considered particularly intriguing. In future elaborations of similar appeals or calls, in which Samir's ideas are

likely to remain an important source of inspiration, more careful attention should be paid to the representation and articulation of often silenced struggles.

In order to make democratic transformations of the world-system, there is a need to create transnational and global political instruments. Some of us have explored the idea of global political parties (Patomäki & Teivainen, 2007). The old ideals of numbered internationals is one way to approach this task. Samir has used the term Fifth International, and the tradition could certainly continue with new numbers. I have sometimes played with the idea of a *Penultimate International*, in order to emphasize the always unfinished task of creating transformational democratic organizations. Whatever terminology we use, one of the current theoretical and political challenges is to take matters of representation more seriously.

In the social movement activism of recent decades, there has sometimes been a tendency to regard 'political representation' as something that belongs to old politics of states and traditional parties or trade unions. For example, in the World Social Forum and occupy movements, ideals of direct participation and 'I can only represent myself' have been common. There has been a fear that taking political representation more seriously would lead back to such state-centric strategies that already led to various disappointments. Samir's 'politics you know in Caracas', that I referred to earlier in this article, had some aspects of this kind of return.

With Silke Trommer we have pointed to the need of cutting the umbilical cord between representation and the state (Teivainen & Trommer, 2017). Political representation should be seen as something that matters also in radical non-state politics. Perhaps transnational and global political organizations of the future will find novel strategies to integrate both state and non-state actors and help create a democratizable global political space. *The global political* should not consist only of the state-centric 'politics you know in Caracas'. Nor should it be approached through lenses that see social movements and other non-state actors as mere pressure groups or otherwise disconnected from real political action that involves political representation. Samir's work, with its strengths and weaknesses, is likely to continue as an important point of reference in these tasks.

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Footnotes

[1] The terminology of the world-systems perspective normally divides the Global South into the periphery and the semiperiphery. The Global North is called the core.