

# The New Challenge of the Peoples' Internationalism

Translated Saturday 9 February 2008, by [Isabelle Métral](#)

**Eight years after the first World Social Forum, the Third-World intellectual retraces the main historical stages in the evolution of capitalism and examines critically the alternatives that this century's geopolitical upheavals adumbrate.**

Samir Amin is a member of the international committee of the World Social Forum and president of Alternatives International (Egypt). He is the author of a great number of economic, political, and geopolitical studies. On Saturday January 26, 2008 he attended the conference on "Anti-Globalization and Post-Anti-Globalization" organized by the association *Mémoire des luttes* (Memory of struggles) and the review *Utopie critique* (Critical Utopia).

**HUMA: How do you analyse the current developments of the global economic and financial crisis?**

**SAMIR AMIN:** To me, the take-over of the free-market system by finance, considered by many as a new, lasting form of capitalism, was only an opportunistic move by capital to surmount its contradictions. The growth in capital's income and the decrease in labour's cannot go on indefinitely. The financial side of the system was its Achilles' heel. Sub-primes are not the cause of the crisis, which is systemic really, but only a minor hitch that triggered it off. After privatizing profits the extant ruling forces will see to it that losses are spread over the whole of society, namely that workers, pensioners and vulnerable Third World countries foot the bill.

**HUMA: What makes you think that capitalism as a historical system is on the decline, as you are known for saying?**

**SAMIR AMIN:** The capitalist system as a historical system went through a long phase of maturation. But its apex was very short: indeed, after being politically ushered in by the French Revolution and made economically possible by the Industrial Revolution it did not outlast the nineteenth century. The end of that apex was announced as early as 1871 by the Paris Commune and shortly after by the first revolution that called itself socialist, namely the Russian revolution. From that time, contrary to what is generally received, and on the strength of appearances merely, capitalism went into a decline. It was challenged in the course of the twentieth century as a political, social, and economic system by alternative projects (socialist or communist), but it was increasingly confronted with a growing gulf of its own creation that divided the dominant centres and the dominated peripheries. The contrast fuelled the peoples' revolt, their refusal to accept and adjust to that domination and to the ensuing degradation of their living conditions.

**HUMA: In what way do the ideological and geopolitical dimensions of the challenge to capitalism interconnect?**

**SAMIR AMIN:** The ideological and geopolitical dimensions just cannot be dissociated. The reason is simply that it is in the nature of capitalism in its actual current form, as a global system, to be imperialist. In the last century, this conjunction became formalized as socialist revolutions erupted on the periphery of the capitalist system. I am thinking of the Chinese, Vietnamese, and Cuban revolutions. Precisely, the conjunction between the two dimensions of the challenge to capitalism defines what might be called the first wave. That wave consisted of the revolutions made in the name of socialism and of the great movements of national liberation, which occupied varying positions on the scales of radicalism, non-alignment, anti-imperialism. This first wave reached its historical limit soon enough. It lost steam. The exhaustion came very soon in Third World countries that had just come out of their national liberation process, but not so soon as concerns the revolutions made in the name of socialism. But the end-result was the same: the first wave lost its impetus then exhausted itself.

**HUMA: And you think a second wave may rise that would challenge the whole global system: how could that come to pass?**

**SAMIR AMIN:** Between the wave that died out and the new wave that can and must rise in the twenty-first century, there is a trough. In that depressed interval the social and political forces pitted against each other are most unequal. They are so unequal that capital is strong enough to counter-attack, supported by fancy notions about the so-called end of history and buoyed by the fact that the first wave has totally subsided. These circumstances make it possible for capital to construct a reactionary discourse, which is by no means the "liberal" discourse it is claimed to be. This discourse points back to the type of discourse that was staple currency in the nineteenth century after the Restoration of the Bourbon monarchy in 1815, and which expressed the nostalgic yearning after l'Ancien regime that preceded the Revolution. Sarkozy's is the perfect illustration of that kind of reactionary discourse. What he calls "reform" is actually counter-reform aimed at doing away with all the rights that workers conquered in the course of the twentieth century. Just now we are in that trough. But we can already see the first ripples on the surface of the ocean that might herald the second wave. We can perceive them for instance in what I call the revolutionary breakthroughs in Latin America. The process under way in that sub-continent is characteristic enough, being both anti-imperialist –especially anti-US, since US imperialism holds that part of the world under its violent rule – and inspired by socialism. This inspiration is formulated in various ways, sometimes vaguely, sometimes more specifically, or even dogmatically. But it is interesting to note that anti-imperialism and the socialist inspiration are once more closely associated.

**HUMA: What exactly do you mean by those "revolutionary breakthroughs" in Latin America? What difference do you make between those and revolution proper?**

**SAMIR AMIN:** I think the long decline of capitalism can be seen as being potentially a long transition to global socialism. What I mean by "long" is that such a historical process might involve several waves and spread over several centuries. In the communist tradition, revolution and the construction of socialism were thought of as involving short historical processes: they were merely a matter of years or decades. So I prefer to talk of revolutionary breakthroughs rather than of revolution. "Revolution" invites the misguided notion that all problems could be solved overnight. "Revolutionary breakthroughs", to me, correspond to the notion of steps by which other logics than that of capitalism might be initiated, which might pave the way themselves for further breakthroughs, further "waves". But that has nothing to do with historical determinism. There are objective necessities, in the Hegelian sense of the term, but no absolute determinism. Supposing that transition to socialism did not take

place, the alternative scenario would consist of a long transition to more and more barbarity. The two possibilities coexist distinctly.

**HUMA: You have been quoted as saying that the trough we are in just now, that depressed interval, is propitious to the development of all sorts of “illusions” about capitalism. What exactly do you mean by that?**

**SAMIR AMIN:** “The old world is dying. The new world is slow in coming. And monsters loom in the chiaroscuro.” What Gramsci wrote here has always struck me as being an accurate and profoundly illuminating statement. The old world, coextensive with the first wave that challenged capitalism, is dead. The second wave is now about to rise. In this chiaroscuro the “monsters” take on the shape of personages like Bush, Sarkozy, Berlusconi on the one hand, and Bin Laden and his accomplices on the other. But this chiaroscuro is also propitious to great illusions. These can be classified into three families which divide the world between them, one or another of them prevailing in one place or another, but which nevertheless exist and coexist everywhere. The first illusion might be called the “social-democratic” illusion. It can be defined as the illusion that there can be such a thing as capitalism with a human face. And at some stages in the history of capitalism when the odds were not so heavy against the working classes this illusion did inspire political projects indeed. I have no contempt for what the “welfare state” regimes achieved after World War II. But these achievements would never have taken place without the “communist threat” that haunted the bourgeoisie at the time. The ruling classes of the time saw that threat embodied in the USSR. But actually the threat was not so much communism or the USSR as the threat that their own peoples represented to them.

After World War II the redistributive, fixed-benefit pension schemes, the special regimes and social security would have been inconceivable had the Communist Party (to take the French example) not had such a strong position. That was true more or less everywhere in the world, though in different guises. Capitalism with a human face cannot exist outside periods when the rule of capital itself is weaker. But when its rule is firmly established on solid foundations the face of capitalism is not a bit human. It shows its true face then, a fierce one. Which we can see for ourselves now. Consequently it is quite illusory to believe that capitalism can evolve towards a humanized version. The illusion has no foundation at all and is dangerous in that it leaves the working class defenceless by dangling the hope that it might get benefits without having to fight for them, without tipping the scales in the class war to its benefit. That kind of illusion is prevalent in Western Europe.

In the so-called emerging countries the nationalist illusion is the prevalent illusion. That kind of illusion consists in considering that countries like China, India, and Brazil are strong enough by now to impose themselves as equal partners on the older powers. Those illusions are fed by all the bulk of literature on the fear of the “rising Chinese quest for hegemony”, almost a variant form of the “yellow peril”. Of which a counterpart will be found in the nationalist literature that extols the changes that are taking place in China and elsewhere. As a matter of fact, the international power contest, the rule of financial capital, and the collective imperialism jointly exerted by the US, Europe, and Japan will not allow these countries to play equal partners with the older powers on the world scene. The increasingly aggressive language with respect to China is a case in point. That language already has its actual counterpart in brutal attacks against weaker countries like Iraq. Other countries which are not as weak but which are nevertheless countries of middle importance like Iran for instance have now come under a threat themselves. What those aggressions show really is that the US will not stop short of waging war on China should it threaten its interests. In such a context it is quite illusory to believe that emerging countries will be able to get the upper hand within the system and break off its capitalist logic.

The third series of illusions is really the worst as it includes the cults of the past, which may appeal to the peoples that History has defeated, like the Arab countries, and more generally Islamic countries, but also sub-Saharan Africa, which are tempted to seek solutions in their “roots”, by reconstructing a mythic past that never existed. There are easy covers for that kind of fascination with the past, like religion, adhesion to religion, or the claim of ethnic or tribal roots. Being founded on a pseudo-authenticity that is fabricated these cults are disconnected from reality. Those three illusions are currently active in our different societies.

**HUMA: In your last book “The case for a fifth international” [1] you propose encouraging the crystallization of the second wave against capitalism. What would this involve?**

**SAMIR AMIN:** The time when popular forces were in the doldrums and such notions were in vogue as that socialism had been definitively defeated or that capitalism spelt the end of history – that time is over. Since the late 1990s it has made way for a rallying call for another world, a better one. The World Social Forums have turned the spotlights on the struggles. But it will be a long way before the convergence of these struggles crystallizes into coherent and efficient strategies capable of routing the plans of the US and its accomplices to gain military control over the whole world, and of breaking new paths to XXIst century socialism - a socialism that must be more genuinely democratic than the socialism of the first, nineteenth-century wave. To struggle for democracy *and* for social progress, to re-build on this foundation the peoples’ internationalism against capital’s cosmopolitanism, such is the challenge the left must take up all the world over.

[1] “Pour une Cinquième Internationale”, Le Temps des Cerises, 2006