

Interview with Samir Amin

Fabio Petito: Would you briefly comment on the birth and history of the new social movements?

Samir Amin: I have participated in the building of the new movements from the very beginning. Social movements of course have always existed in history. The new social movements have emerged in the 1990s as a defensive reaction to the attack of neoliberalism against the rights of peoples, particularly the attack on the welfare state in the West and on state protection in the South, etc. It's a normal thing that the movements have first appeared on a defensive line. Then, they have gradually realized that since this challenge was global they also had to organize on a global scale. In 1997 we created the World Forum for Alternatives which was composed of organizations from Asia, Africa, Latin America, and Europe. In 1999 we organized the first anti-Davos in Davos, which was a small media event. Only a few people were present, but they represented some 50 major trade union, peasant, women's, and environmental organizations. The idea to organize the first World Social Forum (WSF) at Porto Alegre arose in this meeting.

The movements have progressed since then. There is a growing number of organizations that aim to bring forward proposals for positive alternatives. I call this process –and I am not alone- building convergency within diversity. This does not amount to a single party system or a single ideology system. It is a complex, heterogeneous process that can facilitate the promotion of feasible alternatives to neoliberal globalization.

F.P.: Can social movements become actors that bring about real change in global politics?

S.A.: I think they have become already, although they are still very weak and in their first stage of development. Social movements will become significant only when they articulate and work in the pursuit of real alternatives to neoliberal globalisation. I am referring to *alternatives* in the plural; concrete conditions are very different from one country to another or from one region to another and accordingly social struggles need to be sensitive and respond to these divergences.

F.P.: Do you think that the nation-state level is still the primary arena of world politics?

S.A.: Yes. In Europe, for instance, policy is still in the hands of national governments; change of governments occurs in the best of cases through elections and in the rest of cases through other insidious means. It is not productive to assume that we can skip over the national level. The strategies which are developed on the national level should also acknowledge the interdependency between the various, diverse national spaces; they should also have a regional and international dimension.

F.P.: Do you imply that traditional party politics continue to be the main game in town?

S.A: We cannot avoid politics and therefore political parties. This doesn't mean that traditional political parties are effectively responding to the challenges of contemporary social transformations.

For instance, anti-capitalist parties emerged at the end of the nineteenth century as a specific form of political organization of the working class: the one party supposedly represented the one vanguard class, whether this was a social democrat, a socialist or a communist party. These parties were also organized around a series of patterns of action: the strike, the protest, the election, even the revolution or the war of liberation.

Social conditions are no longer the same. Capitalism has changed and therefore the organization of labour has changed. We ought to invent different forms of organization for social and political movements. I don't distinguish between social and political movements: I categorize under the term social movements all those that reject the current organization of society and which struggle for change.

F.P.: Still, the differences amongst social movements are enormous. What do they have in common apart from recognizing neoliberal globalisation as their enemy?

S.A: At the present stage you are right. The movements, which participate in the World Social Forum display, for instance, a large diversity. There are also asymmetries in importance: mass popular movements assemble together with think-tanks, and small or larger groups that are formed around specific issues. Most of the feminist movements, for example, do not find it useful to connect women's struggles with a global vision of the transformation of society.

This doesn't mean that there can not be a significant common ground for most of them, certainly not all. This was what we tried to do with the Appeal of Bamako. In Bamako during the first day of the World Social Forum, a large number of organizations met to discuss whether it would be possible to build a common platform for further action. Out of this discussion, came the Appeal of Bamako which detailed ten areas with first thoughts and first proposals. The Appeal was presented also in Caracas and was adopted by the vast majority of participants.

F.P.: What are the advantages of the current polycentric structure of the World Social Forum?

S.A: I wish that the structure would be even more polycentric with five, six, ten big regional or even national forums. In this respect, we could mobilize more forces. Second, there could be more common ground for discussion. Third, it would facilitate coordination among the movements.

F.P.: Isn't the World Social Forum dominated, however, by Western social movements?

S.A.: It is not so. If you try to move beyond appearance, certainly not. It is true that Western, particularly European, NGOs are everywhere and that is because they have funds.

However, if you look at the participation in the debates within the WSF then you see the importance of non-Western mass popular movements. I will give you an example. In relation

to peasant struggles, Via Campesina who has managed to bring together the most active peasant organisations, basically in Latin America, is extremely influential much more than Western NGOs. Via Campesina has recently built ties with peasant organization in countries as far different as in West Africa, Southern Africa, India and even China.

F.P.: Are social movements fundamental for the attainment of global democracy?

S.A.: Social movements are an important instrument for the progress of democracy. I prefer to use though the word democratization, which alludes to an endless process. You cannot reduce democracy to a blueprint. Democracy is the product of continuous struggle, involving particularly the victims of the system. We must link democracy to the notion of social progress. Democracy without social progress is not ultimately accepted by the people, it loses its legitimacy. That is why the association of democracy with neoliberalisms of all sorts has led to a blind alley, it has menaced democracy itself.

In the past, social progress has been achieved without democracy, whether, in the ex-communist countries or in the national-populist states, i.e Peron's Argentina or Nasser's Egypt. These were cases where social progress was implemented from above and it seemed to work for a certain period. But now the page has turned.

F.P.: Yes, we witness a widespread concern that democracy is crisis on a global scale.

S.A.: In democratic countries, neo-liberalism has de-legitimized democracy as much as possible. In 1963 the Trilateral Commission –note that Samuel Huntington was the US representative- reported that the liberal system suffers from too much democracy. I agree with the exact opposite: the system, however democratic it may be, is always suffering from not enough democracy, provided that we associate democracy with the politicization of the people and with initiatives and actions coming from below.

This is where social movements have a role to play. You can call it participatory democracy if you wish. The point is to move beyond the notion and practice of representative democracy, to conceive democracy as an endless process where the movements continuously embody the demands and desires of the people.

F.P.: How do you assess the recent student protests in France against the precarisation of labour?

S.A.: Precarity always existed in the capitalist system. Thirty years ago precarity represented about 15% of the wage earners, it was the condition of relatively young women, of migrant labour, and characterised mainly in rural areas. In contrast, precarity refers today to almost 50% of wage earners. This is an immense, negative change; it signals social regression. It is also important to note that precarity has advanced without too much noise.

The protests in France were the first massive reactions against precarity in the world. For the first time, all the trade unions in France participated in the protests against the CPE. This is a sign that the movement against precarity can amplify in other European countries, in Britain, Germany, Spain, etc.

F.P.: What are the challenges that the European left needs to face in order to build a mass movement from below?

S.A.: Within the last 20-30 years the majority of the electoral left in Europe, be it social democrats, communists or ex-communists have gradually accepted Atlanticism and neoliberalism. This development has opened the way to demagogues of the ultra-right and has re-invigorated chauvinistic nationalism.

The Left is gradually recognizing this. The movements against precarity in France is a indicates that something is changing and segments of the Left are moving against the neoliberal agenda.

F.P.: Is the center-left option proposed in Europe today a sign of political regression?

S.A.: No, I don't want to condemn the centre-left, altogether. On the contrary, I think that an alliance between the left and the center-left is fundamental. There has never been a victory of the left without it. Even Mao has said that a progressive country should be governed by the center-left. You cannot rule without the support of the majority and the majority is at the center-left.