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Planetize the Movement!

Opening Essay for GTI Forum [Planetize the Movement!](#)

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The Historical Conjuncture

In January 2020, as I was writing this essay, Americans celebrated the life and legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., whose message of social equality, economic justice, and peace is as relevant today as ever—arguably more so. That month, the US and Iran (the country of my birth) seemed to be on the brink of war. Australia was experiencing climate change-related disaster, the opioid crisis continued to devastate communities and families across the US, and refugees and migrants still faced exclusion and disdain. Income inequality in the US and in many other countries grew ever wider, as the power of capital over labor remained strong. Across the globe, the rightward march of populist politics continued apace.

This is only a small list of the world's problems, some of which are common to humanity and some specific to nation-states and communities. To echo Lenin, what is to be done? For an answer, we can echo Dr. King: "planetize our movement."¹ But what is "the movement," and how can it be planetized?

The World Social Forum, launched in 2001 to assert that a "another world is possible," attracted civil society organizations and social movements from across the globe, many of them associated with what scholars called the global justice movement, or "the movement of movements."² Then came the global financial crisis, followed by the Arab Spring demanding the fall of authoritarian and corrupt regimes, the European summer of anti-austerity protests, and Occupy Wall Street (OWS), with its rallying cry against the privileged 1%.

A decade later, we face a weakened and increasingly irrelevant WSF, the modest harvest of the Arab Spring along with failed states, the demise of OWS, entrenched neoliberalism, and unabated militarism. These developments have wreaked havoc on communities in the Global South, generating the refugee and migrant waves that resulted in the right-wing populist backlash. Meanwhile, right-wing populist leaders have appropriated some of the grievances and even language of the Left—especially the very early critiques of neoliberal capitalist globalization, as well as the unions’ despair over labor’s displacement and stagnating wages—to win over citizens in country after country.

From a world-historical perspective, we are living in a period similar to the early twentieth century, during which the British Empire was losing its global hegemony.³ That period led to inter-imperialist rivalries, the Great War, the expansion of socialism and communism, the fascist reaction, and the Second World War. Today, US hegemony is similarly in decline, and the transition and chaos we experience include growing powers challenging that hegemony (China, Russia, Iran); military adventures and the destabilization of states by the US and its allies (e.g., Afghanistan 2001, Iraq 2003, Honduras 2009, Libya 2011, Syria since 2011, Yemen since 2015); right-wing populist political parties and governments; and the ecological crisis.

The moment is ripe for an alternative. Labor unrest has grown around the world, encompassing industrial workers, teachers, health workers, janitors, and others across the Middle East and North Africa, in Latin America, and even in the US. Indeed, we may be nearing a classic Leninist “revolutionary situation,” which could be the culmination of “the world revolution of 20xx.”⁴ If so, the Global Left should be better prepared to meet the challenge.

The good news is that there is a “new Global Left” that enjoys a multitude of emerging movements, including climate justice groups led by young people.⁵ The rich array of activist groups and the dynamism and passion they display excite a sense of possibility. However, the very diversity of movements and their weak interconnection could constrain the Global Left’s ability to achieve meaningful change.⁶ Without consensus around a common agenda, how are we to make the great transition from an entrenched global system based on capitalist profit, top-down decision-making, war, and environmental degradation to a world where people and the planet take center stage in politics and policy? Surely we need not only resistance on a multiplicity of grounds, but

also agreement on a clear, coherent, and feasible alternative to the unjust, undemocratic, and unsustainable status quo.

A Missing Global Actor

The socialist and communist movements and parties of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries pinned their hopes on the capacity of a united working class, defined as a largely male industrial laboring class (“the proletariat”), to tame and challenge capitalism. In the latter part of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, the nature of that class changed, now encompassing a broader spectrum of working people, such as those in public and private services (including care workers) who labor under the supervision of highly paid managers and administrators, along with the precariat and gig economy workers. On the Left, however, many do not regard that more inclusive working class as a central actor, despite its composition spanning race, ethnicity, religion, national origin, and gender.⁷

Instead, today’s movements—certainly in the US—seem to define actors based on particular identities and interests. Rather than the singular actor of yore (the working class), today there is a multiplicity of actors across numerous movements. The question arises as to whether such a multiplicity of actors can generate the necessary coordination and craft a strategy to challenge the powers-that-be—economic and political elites situated in national governments; in the financial, corporate, and military sectors; and in institutions of global governance. If those elites are so well connected, why is it so difficult for our numerous movements to coalesce around a shared identity and agenda?

In my estimation, the Left has lost sight of the proverbial forest for the proverbial trees. It has gotten far too caught up in culture wars and battles over identity, forgetting the centrality of political economy to the hidden injuries not only of class, but also of race and ethnicity, women’s subordination, the destruction of the commons, and inter- and intra-state rivalries, violence, and war. This strategic shift away from political economy has removed the Left’s traditional constituency—the working class in all its breadth and diversity—from a meaningful role. The shift also has confused the Left’s priorities. For instance, we cannot truly address the problems of racism and discrimination without giving urgent attention to the systemic problems of class: low-income

communities devastated by precarious employment, the loss of public investment, dirty air and water, poor-quality schooling, and bad health.

The politics of class cannot be divorced from those of race and of sex, because class is imbued with race and sex, and race and sex are themselves imbued with class. Under patriarchal and racist capitalism, there is no class exploitation without racial and sexual oppression. The separation of the three intersecting dimensions across unconnected movements—often lacking in understanding of and solidarity with each other—is among the unfortunate outcomes of our times, caused to some degree by partial, segmented internal politics, but largely by the relentless and effective political, cultural, and ideological campaigns of the ruling elites.

Catalytic Action Now

In the wake of the global financial crisis, it became clear that the world needed a new economic system. Change did not come about, however. To offer a viable alternative to financialization and runaway “shareholderism,” movements need to stand for workplace democracy and shared management, and for long-term rational and people-oriented planning over short-term profit. Although breaking up huge corporations should be the goal, taxing them adequately and using the revenue for societal needs and rights, not for continued militarism, can steer society in the right direction in the interim.

At the same time, we also need to think bigger. Contrary to the conventional wisdom that socialist and communist experiments all ended in failure, I believe that there is a lot we can learn from them. Indeed, this “failure literature” lacks balance and historical accuracy. The great socialist, communist, and liberation movements of the past may not have accomplished all that they could have or intended to, but they were very effective providing education and culture for the poor and imparting the legacy of equality, economic justice, and women’s advancement. The Communist movement had its shortcomings, but it promoted women’s equality and racial equality, supported numerous liberation movements, and checked capitalist and imperialist expansion.

In contrast, our recent movements have failed even in the short run. They may have changed the subject—certainly OWS highlighted the problem of income inequalities and helped reintroduce capitalism and its flaws into the national conversation in the US—but they could not compel

change of the system itself, much less dislodge its major actors and beneficiaries. Unlike the progressive movements of the late nineteenth century and much of the twentieth century that gave us socialism and social democracy, an end to British colonialism, Third World development, and the demise of authoritarianism in southern Europe, the movements of the twenty-first century have not been able to make headway in structural or systemic terms. Instead, the collapse of world communism—celebrated across the globe—actually generated new crises and chaos.

One response to the crisis has been the new municipalism, which aims to implement localized democratic practices and people-oriented resource allocation. In one promising example, the administration of the Communist mayor of Santiago, Chile, has created a “people’s pharmacy,” offered cheap eye-care and glasses, increased public housing, and embraced leftist approaches to community safety, among other progressive people-oriented initiatives.⁸ But localism is not enough, as many of our problems are global in nature. The recklessness of the financial sector has had ripple effects across borders; the obsession with economic growth and capital accumulation has generated a massive, global environmental crisis. That brilliant experiment in radical democratic feminist municipalism—Rojava in northern Syria—was overturned in October 2019 by a brutal Turkish invasion facilitated by the Trump administration. Thus, we must heed Dr. King’s message to “take the nonviolent movement international” and to planetize it.

The Global Left and its infrastructure remain fragmented and disconnected, except for periodic mass rallies against the most egregious actions of global capitalism and imperial states. But it wasn’t always so. Once, vibrant Internationals were organized to guide and promote a worldwide movement. The influential First International, initially called the International Workingmen’s Association, was formed in 1864, but contention between the anarchist and socialist wings led to its demise in the late 1870s. Its successor, the Second International, had great success, but fractured in the run-up to World War I. The Third International formed after the Russian revolution to unite socialist and communist groups from across Europe and Asia, but later, under Stalin, became corrupted into the highly centralized Comintern.⁹

Both the successes and the failures of these Internationals offer vital lessons: a powerful worldwide movement could be premised on both a global political organization with a strategy for change and the strength of plural and diverse movements that call the status quo into question. To move

forward, we need to look back at the old Internationals and, at the same time, not give up on the World Social Forum. The crises and injustices of our times call for both a coordinated “united front” and a loosely aligned “popular front.”

Some say the language of the past—socialism, communism, planning—is outmoded and unlikely to resonate. And yet, many young people embrace the term socialism; in the US, they rallied around Bernie Sanders’s call for “democratic socialism,” and in the UK, they coalesced around the Labour Party’s left-wing faction, Momentum, and its leader, Jeremy Corbyn. In Tunisia, where young people are losing hope in capitalist democracy because of high unemployment and other economic difficulties, the left-wing student union UGET and the many young supporters of the Front Populaire call for planning and a strong welfare state. Around the world, women have come together around a more inclusive, transformative vision of feminism, which some call “feminism for the 99%.”¹⁰ The “left nationalism” of Scotland, Northern Ireland, and the Kurds is also part of the new Global Left and could help constitute a global movement against capitalism, militarism, and oligarchic states.

The world’s injustices as well as new possibilities for alliance have inspired calls for coordinated forms of organizing. The late Egyptian Marxist economist Samir Amin, for instance, called for a Fifth International.¹¹ But to balance the complementary needs of global coordination and plural autonomy, two Internationals may be needed, one that remains horizontally based—the movement of movements—and the other vertically organized, drawing inspiration and lessons from the old Internationals.

What might this mean in practical, strategic terms? To start, we should revitalize the World Social Forum.¹² It encompasses diverse grievances, identities, and interests; it remains the site for dialogic discussion and the cultivation of solidarity across movements; and it has resisted the authoritarian impulses and practices of capital and the state. It can remain an open space for dialogue among place-based and identity-expressive movements. Building up the Global Left and helping advance a Great Transition, however, requires a global political organization to do the necessary cross-movement “translation” work and deliver a plan for structural change at national, regional, and global levels. Accomplishing this will be an arduous task, but we can’t afford to wait.

Whether it is called the Fifth International, the United Front, the Progressive International, or the World Party, such an organization would be vertically organized, along the lines of the earlier

Internationals but with the involvement of anti-imperialist feminist groups such as Code Pink, the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, Marche Mondiale des Femmes, and the new Feminist Foreign Policy Project. This planetized formation would encompass progressive parties, anti-neoliberal unions, and anti-war movements across the globe. It would practice democratic decision-making and offer a clear vision and mission of an alternative system of production, social reproduction, trade, and international relations. It would revive the 2011 Arab Spring call, "The people want the fall of the regime," and create a powerful message demanding a re-enactment of what occurred in 1989/1990, but in reverse: *"The people want the fall of the ruling capitalist elites."*

Such a plan calls for a renewed emphasis on the working class, expansively defined and represented. Unions could organize the unorganized, carry out the necessary political education work among their members, and create broad coalitions with progressive political parties and unions across borders.¹³ It is worth noting that unions of teachers and nurses have been taking to the streets and making demands in Morocco, Iran, Iraq, Tunisia, Chile, and France, as well as in the US. Such parallel developments are ripe for cross-fertilization and coordination.

We should take the best from the past—planning, coordinating, internationalism, and action—and move forward with a common agenda for systemic transformation. To move forward with an International, veterans of past, more centralized movements and organizations might take the lead in organizing an initial meeting, to convene in a country that has felt the devastating effects of neoliberalism, such as Argentina or Greece. Another venue could be Tunisia—now the only genuinely democratic country in the Middle East/North Africa region. Our movements need to coalesce to make the present moment of populism and hegemonic decline an advantageous one for a Great Transition—this time toward a global socialist-feminist democracy built through the synergy of a new International and a revitalized WSF.

Endnotes

1. Martin Luther King, Jr., *The Trumpet of Conscience* (New York: Harper and Rowe, 1968), 34.
2. See the GTI forum on the World Social Forum: <https://greattransition.org/gti-forum/farewell-to-the-wsf>. See also Donatella Della Porta, ed., *The Global Justice Movement: Cross-National and Transnational Perspectives* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2007); Jackie Smith, Marina Karides, et al., *The World Social Forums and the Challenge of Global Democracy* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm, 2008); Valentine M. Moghadam, *Globalization and Social Movements: Islamism, Feminism, and the Global Justice Movement*, 2nd ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2013).
3. Giovanni Arrighi and Beverly Silver, *Chaos and Governance in the Modern World-System* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).
4. Christopher Chase-Dunn and Sandor Nagy, "Global Social Movements and World Revolutions in the 21st Century," in *The Palgrave Handbook of Social Movements, Revolutions, and Social Transformation*, ed. Berch Berberoglu (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019): 427–446; Beverly Silver, *Forces of Labor: Workers' Movements and Globalization since 1870* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003).
5. Christopher Chase-Dunn, Richard Niemeyer, Preeta Saxena, Matheu Kaneshiro, James Love, and Amanda Spears, "The New Global Left: Movements and Regimes," IROWS Working Paper 50 (2009), University of California–Riverside, Institute for Research on World-Systems, <https://irows.ucr.edu/papers/irows50/irows50.htm>.
6. Valentine M. Moghadam, "The Movements of Movements: A Critical Review Essay," *Socialism and Democracy* 33, no. 1 (2019): 19–27.
7. Marxist theorist Goran Therborn has written despairingly of labor's prospects: "Class in the 21st Century," *New Left Review* 78 (2012): 5–29. For an alternative view, see Victor Wallis, *Red-Green Revolution: The Politics and Technology of Ecosocialism* (Toronto: Political Animal Press, 2018), esp. ch. 8: "Intersectionality's Binding Agent: The Political Primacy of Class".
8. Daniel Denvir, "A Communist Major in Chile Explains How to Govern Locally from the Left", interview with mayor Daniel Jadue, *Jacobin*, April 26, 2019, <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2019/04/communist-party-chile-left-governance-recoleta>. Thanks to Silvia Dominguez for bringing this to my attention.
9. Although the Comintern ended in 1943, communist parties remained in close contact until the late 1980s, providing support and solidarity for progressive organizations and movements.
10. Cinzia Arruzza, Tithi Bhattacharya, and Nancy Fraser, *Feminism for the 99%: A Manifesto* (New York: Verso, 2019).
11. Samir Amin, "Toward a Fifth International?," in *The Movements of Movements: Rethinking Our Dance*, ed. Jai Sen (New Delhi and Oakland: OpenWord and PM Press), 465–483 (originally written in 2005), and "It is Imperative to Reconstruct the International of Workers and Peoples," International Development Economic Associates July 3, 2018, <http://www.networkideas.org/featured-articles/2018/07/it-is-imperative-to-reconstruct-the-internationale-of-workers-and-peoples/>.
12. Valentine M. Moghadam, "Feminism and the Future of Revolution," *Socialism and Democracy* 32, no. 1 (Summer 2018): 31–53; and "What is Revolution in the 21st Century? Toward a Socialist-Feminist World Revolution," *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 47 (2019).
13. Although Ronaldo Munck dismisses both the Internationals of the past and the WSF as relevant models, he does call for a central role for labor and unions, in "Workers of the World Unite (At Last)," *Great Transition Initiative* (April 2019), <https://greattransition.org/publication/workers-of-the-world-unite>. See also Stephanie Luce, *Labor Movements: Global Perspectives* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2014).

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