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Expanding Our Ambitions Forum: [Planetize the Movement!](#)

Richard Falk

I found Val Moghadam’s “[Planetize the Movement!](#)” a masterful effort to demonstrate the continued diagnostic and prescriptive relevance of Left traditions of thought and practice in responding to the urgent systemic challenges currently confronting humanity. She also offers perceptive comments on the emergence of distinct social movements seeking a better future in distinct spheres of activity, citing especially ecologically oriented activism, feminism in various forms, progressive anti-globalization initiatives, and forms of radical opposition to income and wealth inequalities. Without minimizing obstacles and adverse trends, Moghadam usefully anchors her hopes for the future on two central propositions: first, in her words, “the moment is ripe for an alternative”; and second, planetizing the movement depends on a political economy critique of neoliberal globalization coupled with the advocacy of a new progressive vision that draws heavily on socialist and communist experience and thought of the twentieth century.

I find this a stimulating overall point of departure, and accept the relevance of her innovative formulation of “two Internationals,” a horizontal network of progressive social activist initiatives, which I have characterized as “globalization-from-below,” and a vertical mechanism that builds on the experience of the four Internationals periodically established over the past 150 years, as well as acknowledging Samir Amin’s proposal of a Fifth International to allow leftist influence to resume its vital presence in the aftermath of the Cold War.¹ While Moghadam is sensitive to the argument that reviving Marxist and neo-Marxist interpretations of her call to action has been widely criticized as passé, she remains confident of its catalytic relevance to the present historical conjuncture, citing the responsiveness of American youth to the overtly socialist message of Bernie Sanders. I am not sure about this: while fully agreeing that a movement for the planet must relate centrally to political economy, I am more skeptical about supposing that we can achieve the understanding we *now*

need from the Old Left class and labor-oriented revolutionary rhetoric and worldviews. For one thing, the digital networking that underpins globalization and creates new potentialities, dangers, and risks is not easily accommodated, and however hard one tries, the realities of a postindustrial labor market are increasingly as deeply threatened by automation and artificial intelligence as by exploitative elites. This suggests to me a qualitative change that requires a new vocabulary to describe the plight of many individuals threatened not only on the level of material livelihood but also by dehumanization in relation to a meaningful life experience.

Moreover, I am not convinced that the mainstream Left traditions are very mobilizing with respect to planetizing ambitions regarding the unprecedented bio-ecological-species challenge. This challenge exposes a missing dimension in most versions of leftist thinking that is as vital as the reintegration of political economy preoccupations into progressive thought and action. It is worth noticing in this regard that it is the admonishing voice of Greta Thunberg indicting the established order for its failure to do what is needed to address climate change before it is too late that has had the most pronounced impact on public consciousness in this century. Her declaration of an ecological emergency that dooms the future unless drastic action is taken, including of course against the excesses of capitalism, is oriented far more toward an Enlightenment insistence on heeding the scientific consensus than on rekindling class warfare. Her essential plea is to be guided by facts and evidence, and not by narcissistic material interests of the beneficiaries of the established order.

Because of its focus on class conflict and economic commentary, I believe that most Left thinking fails to attribute enough responsibility for the evils of our world to “modernity” in addition to damage wrought by capitalism, or for that matter socialism. It is due to the modernity paradigm that we have long enthroned ideas of national sovereignty, tribal nationalism, and state-centric world order, which fosters militarism, imperial geopolitics, and prolonged civil strife. Modernity is more responsible for these features of world order than even the rapacious private sector fondness for bloated military budgets, arms trade, and arms races. In the West, particularly, it is from the individualist ideologies of modernity that we derive this confusion of endowing economic growth and technological innovation with limitless horizons of progress and the bestowal of high degrees of personal contentment, while almost forgetting the lost achievements of premodernity with respect to collective identities and cohesive community. It is notable that even the canonical formulation of human decency in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1950) was expressed as rights of the individual, and

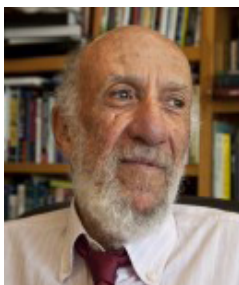
complementary obligations of responsibility were ignored altogether. Political economy is crucial, yet also insufficient unless coupled with comprehensive ethical and cultural reframing of the societal norms associated with the modernity paradigm. For instance, the acceptance of limits, so crucial to constituting a balanced habitat connecting human activities with their natural surroundings, is as absent from traditional Left thinking as it is from mainstream secularism and modernist rationalism.

Finally, I have some thoughts about Moghadam's proposed two Internationals. While directly responsive to the central theme of planetizing the movement, such a framing seems to neglect the importance of the global normative order, particularly international law and the United Nations, as a primary element of a world transformed in accordance with a progressive worldview. Given global-scale challenges, the need for humane structures of global governance is obvious, which implies regulatory and coordinating mechanisms based on a logic of equality rather than as at present, reflecting the geopolitical realities of inequality. The UN and international law currently exhibit the deficiencies of the established system of world order, especially double standards, victor's justice, and geopolitical governance. Only the five winners in World War II (75 years ago) have impunity when it comes to upholding international law and respecting the UN Charter, only the losers or weak states are held accountable for adhering to international criminal law, and only the leading political actors retain discretion to engage in coercive diplomacy by way of threat, sanctions, and intervention, which, if countered at all, depends on war endangering countervailing geopolitical encounters. To place these remarks in the setting of Moghadam's approach, I would insist that there is a need either for a broadened conceptualization of her "second International" or the addition of a "third International" assigned the mission of establishing a more democratized and autonomous United Nations and an international legal order based on the fundamental principle of treating equals equally, whether the unit of concern is a state, a group, or an individual. Such a transformative emphasis on the normative order of regulation, rules, and institutions serving human and global interests as transcending the claims of national interests seems to me to be an integral part of a progressive planetary movement.

Endnotes

1. Richard Falk, *Predatory Globalization: A Critique* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

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