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Arab World

# On Morbid Symptoms

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**Gilbert Achcar explains in an interview for *Jadaliyya* what lies behind his most recent book, *Morbid Symptoms*. [1].**

### **Jadaliyya (J): What made you write this book?**

Gilbert Achcar (GA): Two reasons: one general and one practical. The general reason is the need to assess the new counter-revolutionary phase in the Arab upheaval, which started in 2013. Since early on, I have been describing what began in December 2010 in Tunisia and spread to the whole Arab-speaking region in 2011 as a "long-term revolutionary process" that will necessarily go through a succession of contrasting phases.

My previous book, *The People Want: A Radical Exploration of the Arab Uprising*—which came out in 2013 and was kindly reviewed by Maha Abdelrahman for *Jadaliyya*—analyzed the economic, social and political roots of the regional upheaval and its dynamics, along with an assessment of its first two years. *Morbid Symptoms* is a sequel to *The People Want*, assessing the reactionary phase that has been unfolding since the turning point of 2013.

The practical issue behind this new book is that, as the first edition of *The People Want* was coming close to going out of print, my London publisher asked me to write an updated chapter for a second augmented edition. Soon after I started writing this requested chapter, I realized that I would need quite more than a single chapter to examine the key features of the new phase, draw a new provisional balance-sheet and assess the prospects at this new juncture. I therefore left *The People Want* to continue a life of its own, with a second printing.

The new title is taken from a famous statement by Antonio Gramsci, in his *Prison Notebooks*, about the situation in 1930: "The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear." I found that this sentence summarizes admirably the present Arab condition.

### **J: What particular topics, issues, and literatures does the book address?**

GA: *Morbid Symptoms* starts with a discussion of mainstream misinterpretations of what started in 2011 as going to be a relatively brief and peaceful "democratic transition." This is followed by an examination of the peculiarities of the Arab region that predetermine the revolutionary process to be much more complicated and violent than expected. The introductory chapter leads to two main chapters, one on Syria entitled "The Clash of Barbarisms" (borrowing from the title of a book that I first published in 2002 in the aftermath of 9/11) and another on Egypt entitled "The 'July' of Abdul-Fattah al-Sisi" (a nod to Karl Marx's classic *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, sharing its ironic intention).

The book's concluding chapter surveys the other main theaters of the regional upheaval—Libya, Yemen, and Tunisia—and shows how developments in each theater can be construed as variations of a similar pattern that prevailed over the whole region. The final section draws a critical balance-sheet of the Arab left's behavior since the beginning of the uprising and what is required if a progressive alternative to both the old order and its reactionary Islamic fundamentalist contenders is ever to emerge as a credible force.

My books are based on a selection of the most relevant primary and secondary sources (in European languages as well as in Arabic), and above all on my own engagement with the region. Unlike purely academic authors who feel a

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need to report every visit and exchange with local actors, especially when they are foreign to the region, I am myself both a scholar presently based in a Western academic institution—SOAS, University of London—and an Arab actor who travels constantly across the region and interacts with a wide range of local actors, with no ethnographic estrangement. This is how I am perceived in the region, where the prominence and dissemination of the Arabic editions of my recent books are much greater than in English or French, not to mention other languages into which my works have been translated.

### **J: How does this book connect to and/or depart from your previous work?**

GA: *Morbid Symptoms* connects to *The People Want* in that it builds on the background analysis that the latter includes and carries on applying the same grid of intelligibility to the new developments.

Two major interpretative threads running from the first book to the sequel are, on the one hand, the analysis of the peculiar character of states in the Arab region and, on the other hand, the difference between the usual binary opposition between revolution and counter-revolution in revolutionary upheavals and the triangulation between a progressive revolutionary pole and two rival counter-revolutionary ones in the Arab case. These two distinctive features bear enormous implications for the regional revolutionary process and the formidable challenges it confronts.

Another connection is that *Morbid Symptoms*, in relating the present as history, picks up from where *The People Want* left off (in October 2012, the date of end of writing). Thus, the new book starts examining each local situation by quoting directly from what *The People Want* concluded and forecasted about this same situation. I contend that the key prognoses made in the first book were confirmed by the turn of events.

As for departing, it is the situation that is covered in *Morbid Symptoms* that departs from the one that is covered in *The People Want* rather than one book departing from the other in analytical orientation. The two situations contrast quite sharply indeed: whereas 2011 and 2012 were years of revolutionary euphoria characterized by over-optimism on a backdrop of ongoing upsurge, albeit a waning one, the subsequent years have been characterized by depression and despair on a backdrop of counter-revolution and what looks very much like a Hobbesian war of all against all.

What each of my two books tries to do is to counter or correct the impressionistic mood of the moment by deploying a historical perspective that locates the ongoing developments in the long-term process to which they belong. From that standpoint, the only absolute certainty regarding the region's future is that it will not recover sustained political stability before very long, with further dramatic shifts ahead in both the actual situation and the accompanying mood.

### **J: Who do you hope will read this book, and what sort of impact would you like it to have?**

GA: The first readership for which I wrote these books is the Arabic-speaking readership. I am quite satisfied in this regard with the dissemination and reputation of the Arabic editions, which I have already mentioned. As for the English editions, I hope first that they will be read by those who seek a non-Orientalist or, to put it more squarely, an anti-Orientalist analysis of the ongoing upheaval, an analysis that is informed by a historical materialist perspective open to relevant inputs from other critical and scholarly perspectives. From the angle of shared values, I write for a readership that regards human emancipation from oppression in its various dimensions—political, social, gender, national, ethnic, etc.—as the supreme and indivisible value from which all other derive and to which they must all be subordinate.

Beyond these specific affinities, I believe that anyone wishing to improve their understanding of what is going on in

the Arabic-speaking region, be it as a scholar of the Middle East and North Africa or simply as a citizen of the world, will find useful insights in my work, if only because it is based on a long accumulation of first-hand knowledge and direct experience of the region. The impact I seek varies from political impact on the Arab actors to scholarly impact on the field of Arab-related studies. The latter remains dominated by too much of a Western-centrist perspective for which Arabic sources are only primary sources and hardly ever valuable secondary sources, as if no legitimate scholarly discourse could be expressed in other than European languages—even when the object of knowledge uses a non-European language. (More prosaically, of course, such an attitude often simply reflects a weak grasp of Arabic.)

### **J: What other projects are you working on now?**

GA: Over my now several decades of intellectual activity, I have begun half a dozen of major book projects on which I carry on accumulating findings. I hope to live long enough to complete them, provided the ongoing events do not keep dictating my writing agenda as happened during the last six years.

Some of these projects bear no direct relation to the Arab world. My next major project related to the latter is a comprehensive assessment and discussion of Islamic fundamentalism, tackling all key questions in this regard from a serene assessment of the essentialist interpretations of the phenomenon that attribute it to specific features of Islam to the explanation of the surge of Islamic fundamentalism since the last quarter of the twentieth century and its production of successive waves of violent totalitarian offshoots.

Another less ambitious project related to the Arab world is a little book that I wish to find the time to write on Ibn Khaldun, whom I regard as a great pioneer of modern social sciences still hugely underrated in mainstream Western scholarship.

Source: [Jadaliyya](#).

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[1] [Stanford University Press](#) or [Saqi](#).