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Arab revolutions

“The events are essentially a source of hope”

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Christian Höller: The recent uprisings in various Arab countries have been accompanied, at least on the side of Western commentators, by equal measures of hope and fear. Hopes that at last a sustained wave of democratization will sweep through these societies, which have resisted reforms for so long. Fears that more reactionary or totalitarian tendencies may gain the upper hand. For you, as a profound specialist on the political systems in the region as well as someone with many personal ties there, what has been the prevailing feeling?

Gilbert Achcar: For me, the events are essentially a source of hope. I certainly have worries about the evolution and the future of the movement but the fact that such a revolutionary shockwave is sweeping the region is something very positive. Those who express fear of what is going on are implicitly those who believe that the stability offered by the despotic governments could be regarded as the lesser evil compared to potential scenarios they have in mind, like a Islamic takeover. Such views are not only ethnocentric or antidemocratic but also completely wrong in their assessment because the basic reason for the development of Islamic fundamentalist opposition movements is precisely the existence of such despotic regimes. In fact, most of these regimes have been sponsored by Western countries, thus discrediting the very idea of democracy or secularism as advocated in the West. As long as there are such regimes there will also be those kinds of fundamentalist opposition. One should rather take into consideration the fact that the populations of these countries are fed up with despotism, and that they badly need to get rid of it like every other population in the world. What was deemed good for Eastern Europe, for instance, also applies to Arab countries.

Höller: From a distant or more “outsider” kind of perspective, what has been striking is the vast difference among countries: While some have witnessed on-going, almost “unending” waves of upheaval (like in Egypt) others have stayed comparatively calm. What in your opinion are the main criteria for this, for countries very prone to potential uprisings, while others are almost immune, or maybe too repressive for such scenarios to develop?

Achcar: There is hardly any country in the region that is immune to such a scenario, from Mauritania, Morocco and Algeria to Jordan, Lebanon and Syria, and even Oman and Bahrain. Maybe the United Arab Emirates and Qatar are the only countries that have not been affected, but these are extremely artificial states, where the holders of citizenship actually form a small minority—something like fifteen or twenty percent of the population. As for most other countries, the extent and shape of the protest movement depend on the degree of repression, the point to which the government is hated or not, how despotic it is, if at all. The uprising started in Tunisia where there was quite a despotic government, and spread to countries like Egypt, Libya and Yemen where the regime is abhorred by vast sections of the population. In most other countries in the region, with the major exception of the Saudi kingdom, there is less a problem of harsh despotic regimes but more a demand for political reform, or mainly for social demands as is the case in Iraq. This said, the very uneven development of the movement is a natural result of the unevenness of the region. A lot of countries share a lot of problems and features when it comes to lack of development, social equality, or social justice. But when it comes to patterns of political power there are of course vast differences.

Höller: You recently stated in an article that “first and above all, it’s a democratic uprising.”* From the standpoint of a more fully-fledged radical democracy it would seem that potentially all significant social groups have to join in and find a new alliance, or equilibrium of power in order to effectuate a thorough democratic makeover. Do you see something like this at work for instance in Egypt, as opposed to Libya or Syria, or does this concept not apply at all?

Achcar: Well, we are not yet at a point where we could contemplate radical democracy—depending, of course, on what you put behind this label. When I say that it is a “democratic revolution” I mean that the current movement is much closer to the 19th century “spring of the peoples” (1848), which swept Europe from Paris to Vienna, than to the revolutionary shockwave of 1918, which came in the wake of the Russian revolution and was a class-based revolt led by radical left forces with a perspective of socialist change. That is not what is happening in the Arab world, where the process is more basic than that and involves a very broad coalition—the more despotic the regime, the broader the opposition facing it. Once the first step has been achieved, getting rid of the most prominent representatives of despotism and corruption, the next step is to define in positive terms what kind of alternative political regime is to follow. That is where splits occur within the broader opposition, quite normally. The vanguard of the movement have been people who are dedicated to getting a modern democratic society and respective institutions—mostly young liberal (in the political, not economic sense) democrats, very much like the youth of 1848. But initially, everywhere where there was a despotic regime you also encounter groups adhering to religious fundamentalist perspectives. Once the dictators are gone, there occurs a divorce between the Islamic movement and the Leftist coalition, a divorce that is already becoming very clear in Egypt and Tunisia.

Höller: **Some of the uprisings, at least at the very early stage, seemed to be very much dominated by (as you say) a liberal democratic youth. To what extent has this predominance overshadowed a more class-based, or working-class-related perspective? Or in other words: Do you see a more balanced, or a more unequal relation of forces at work in the current movement?**

Achcar: The best way to address this is to look at the facts. The two countries where the uprisings have been most successful so far, viz. Tunisia and Egypt—and we have to keep in mind that it is still very much an ongoing process even there—are actually the countries where the workers’ movement joined the fray. The workers have been very instrumental in toppling the existing rulers in both countries. But such a class-based movement is lacking in countries like Libya, Yemen, or Syria where there has been no workers’ strikes until now, whereas the strikes were a decisive factor in toppling Mubarak for instance. This is not to say that the workers’ movement in Tunisia or Egypt is inspired by a perspective of social change in the sense of superseding capitalism. These are not movements with a radical anti-capitalist character—which is why we are not in a kind of post-World-War-I situation. These are rather workers who are seizing the opportunity of the current upheaval to push forward their own demands for social change and reform. But this also shows how decisive the worker’s movement can be in the democratic struggle itself. After all, this is a historical pattern if you look for instance at the so-called “cradle of democracy” in Britain where a major role was played by the workers’ Chartist movement in the 19th century in pushing towards universal suffrage (although it was only male actually), against the right to vote based on wealth as it had existed theretofore. This was very instrumental for the overall democratization process.

Höller: **The New York Times recently wrote: “In an arc of revolts and revolution, the idea of a broader citizenship is being tested as the enforced silence of repression gives way to the cacophony of diversity.”** Would you agree with that kind of assessment and if yes, what in your mind would be the necessary steps to transform this “cacophony of diversity” into a roughly democratic system?**

Achcar: Well, “cacophony of diversity” is just another word for democratic pluralism. When it comes to political regimes, I prefer a cacophony over a symphony with an authoritarian conductor. Some people emphasize the fact that there is no leading force in these movements, which in a sense is more reassuring than having a leading party with an eye to monopolizing power. This said, I do not think that there is a cacophony in the sense of chaos but rather that at each stage of the struggle you have different alliances. You do not have the same bloc of forces from A to Z in such complex processes. When it comes to overthrowing the despot you can have a very broad alliance including religious fundamentalist forces. But when it comes to defining the new institutions that you want to replace him with the alliance naturally gets much narrower. Those fighting for democracy can agree on this goal and act together without getting into ideological debates on issues like socialism. This is actually not what is happening. People are mainly concerned with deepening the democratic change and making sure that what started as a

revolutionary process is not aborted but gets to the end of a democratic transformation.

Höller: A lot of responses from the West seem to be governed either by very romanticized revolutionary projections (like a new Mecca of a coming world-revolution) or, on the other extreme, by very misleading Orientalist or Islamophobic fears. To what extent is it possible to escape such projections, especially from the perspective of an outside observer?

Achcar: Well, the fact is that when it comes to democratic aspirations or political freedom, Arabs or other Muslims are not different from Chinese or Latin American or Eastern European peoples. Orientalism in the pejorative sense belongs to a line of thought that believes that people are fundamentally shaped by different cultures, that there is a different cultural essence to different parts of the world and, therefore, different political needs. I reject such views and strongly believe that democracy and freedom are very much universal ideas, and I do not fear the term universal at all in this context. After all, if one looked at Europe in the 18th century one could have said that the culture there was such that European peoples needed absolutist regimes, which is what they had before the monarchies start crumbling at the end of that century and during the next. Similarly, there have been theories about how Eastern European peoples, from Prussia to Russia, were addicted to totalitarianism, and yet Stalinism after 1989 crumbled in an amazingly rapid way and gave way to more or less democratic regimes. If it is not quite yet the case in a country like Russia, it is not a matter of culture but of social-economic and political conditions including the country's size and uneven development. The relative weakness of civil society there is also related to the fact that this is the country where the experience of totalitarianism has been the longest of all. The other point is that those who say that the uprisings are opening up to Islamic fundamentalism are forgetting the fact that the worst regime (when it comes to fundamentalism as well as political and social despotism) in the whole region is the Saudi kingdom. But this is the country most courted by all Western states. The Saudi kingdom, a hugely rich state led by the most extreme Islamic fundamentalist institution, which is actually a U.S. protectorate, is the main source of the spread of fundamentalism in the Muslim world. For at least two decades, the United States in alliance with the Saudi kingdom has been using Islamic fundamentalism against the Left—against left-wing nationalism, against communism and so on. Western Islamophobia is primarily a fear of anti-Western Islamic currents. It is a fear for Western interests and not a fear for the people of the region. Anyone caring for the people in the region would first of all be very happy that the dictatorships are finally getting overthrown, that it is possible now to stage demonstrations and so on. And secondly, they would understand that the fact that a government is collaborating with Western states does not mean that it is enlightened. The Saudi kingdom is the best proof of this.

Höller: One particular fear that is repeatedly expressed are the consequences that the upheaval might have for the security of the state of Israel. At the same time, hopes are emerging (e.g. with the recent opening of Egyptian borders to Gaza) that the living conditions of Palestinians might now significantly improve. What, in your opinion, will be the most relevant consequences for the Israeli–Palestinian conflict?

Achcar: Israel is exactly one of those states that reflect those Western attitudes fearing democracy on the Arab side. It has shown many signs of great anxiety at the democratic uprisings in the region. Here you have the spectacle of a state that is accustomed to boasting that it is “the only democracy in the Middle East,” and that is now struck with anxiety because there are democratic upheavals all around it. Israel as well as the United States know perfectly well that they cannot have friends in the region except despots. If a government is in any way to reflect popular aspirations, it will need to be hostile to Israel and the U.S.—not because the people are fanatics or racists, but because of what they are suffering at the hands of Israel and the U.S. who both occupy Arab territories. The current upheaval raises at least the hope that Israel will finally realize that it cannot continue on the road of arrogance and intransigence, which is very much epitomized by the Netanyahu government. This kind of attitude creates a lot of hatred because it is itself based on deep contempt. Without a change in the Israeli attitude there will never be peace in the region. If you look at the “Palestine Papers,” which were recently published through Al-Jazeera,* you will see that the Palestinian leadership went as far as possible and made every single concession the Israelis wanted it to, but did not get anything in return. Basically, this “Machtpolitik”, which Israel displays and which is purely based on

force, can only lead to disaster in the long run, for the population of Israel as well as for its neighbors.

Höller: Do you expect a new boost of anti-Zionism taking hold now?

Achcar: You can hardly imagine a new boost because the hostility to Israeli policies is already very high. It is boosted by Israel's behavior and not by anything else. Now there is a process of reconciliation and unification of the Palestinians, but they are still committed to pursuing a peaceful settlement. The point is that despite all that Mahmoud Abbas's Palestinian Authority conceded, it did not get anything in return.

Höller: U.S. foreign policy has shown to be very inconclusive and insecure in dealing with the recent uprisings. Are we maybe entering a historical phase that might point towards the end of a strong U.S. influence in the region? Or do you think that the greater geopolitical map will largely stay the same in the near future?

Achcar: We are definitely witnessing a major upheaval in geopolitical terms. Until now, the U.S. used to exert hegemony over the region through a despotic alliance. What we are seeing now is a surge and irruption of the people on the political field, and the U.S. is faced with a situation where it has to take this popular factor into consideration. They have now to build alliances with conservative forces enjoying a genuine popular influence, which is why they are now striking a deal with the Muslim Brotherhood whom they consider to be a relatively moderate force among Islamic fundamentalism. This can be seen in Egypt where the Muslim Brotherhood is collaborating with the military. The U.S. is trying to develop a plan B for the region, with the Muslim Brotherhood as a key player; they also bring in their Turkish allies but the lynchpin of their strategy remains the Gulf monarchies and their Gulf Cooperation Council*. After all, that is where the oil is, which makes this region so important for the U.S. Otherwise they would not give a damn about it.

Höller: To come to a different aspect of the recent upheaval: A lot has been made of the alleged role of new media and especially social media—“Facebook, Twitter, and other communication tools”—in organizing the uprisings. How relevant or realistic are such claims from a political theorist's point of view? How would you describe the overall status of technological modernization with respect to the more political and social modernization processes that are at stake now?

Achcar: We have to look at such technological means for what they are. They are means and instruments but they do not create movements. Protest movements have always existed in modern times regardless of whether you only had the very basic printing press in the 18th century, or the Internet like today. People have always used the available technology to organize and move. One important dimension, though, is the network character of organization, which is very much facilitated by the network nature of new media technology. This allows a more horizontal type of organization and therefore, facilitates a movement without recognizable leaders. In most democratic uprisings nowadays, you find this same tendency towards new and more flexible forms of organization to emerge in the struggle. With tools such as Facebook, you can do it straightaway over a whole country if not a whole set of countries whereas in the past, it would start in one city, then every other city would have to follow suit, and so on; or there was one leading party that already had an organization everywhere. So the new technology facilitated a lot this type of horizontal organizing but it did not create the movement. In that sense, there was no “Facebook revolution” indeed.

Höller: Six years ago, in 2005, you wrote about the Arab spring—“late and cold” were the qualifications you used back then.* It has taken quite a while for this metaphorical spring to materialize, or become “warmer.” What, in your opinion, will be the rough timeframe for the current spring to evolve into a more full-blown summer?

Achcar: When I used the spring metaphor in that article it was ironic. In fact, that was what the media and the Bush administration wanted people to believe to be happening in 2005 as a result of the occupation of Iraq and the pressures they exerted on Egypt and the Saudi kingdom for some cosmetic changes. There were some changes indeed but it certainly was not a “spring of the peoples.” Today, the spring metaphor is much more justified, even though the “spring of the peoples” in the 19th century ended badly. Its impact, however, could not be eradicated. The legacy remained and ultimately, the democratic changes happened. Currently, I think that there is more ground for hope because in the 19th century the dominant condition of the world was much more despotic altogether than it is nowadays. The Arab world is more of an exception in our present world, but the people have started to overcome their fear, which was the best tool of despotism. Whatever happens in the short run and whatever is the outcome of elections in different countries, there is now a real possibility to build a strong democratic movement. Therefore, there are good reasons for hope and measured optimism without falling into the illusion that there will be no major obstacles or difficulties ahead. What has already been achieved is absolutely impressive.

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