

Middle East: Why leftists must stay left... dialogue with Dr. Gilbert Achcar

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For nearly a decade, the Arab region has been experiencing a state of unprecedented popular momentum in its modern history. Ten years of popular revolutions and counterrevolutions, chants against military dictatorships and oppressive regimes.

Dreams of democracy, freedom and social justice. The rapid rise and fall of those with Islamic political ideologies in Egypt, civil and proxy wars in both Yemen and Syria. Division in Libya and signs of a regional war. Relative stability in Tunisia, caused by anticipation and anxiety over the situation.

Ten years of hopes and dreams and aspiration for a better future, ten years of wars and destruction, displacement and asylum. Nevertheless, despite the dangers facing everyone, and despite the uncertainty of what will happen if the masses explode in the streets and squares, revolutionary waves follow one after the other. First, beginning of 2011, Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Syria, Yemen, and Bahrain. And recently, Iraq, Lebanon, Algeria and Sudan.

Ten years of left-wing slogans, freedom, bread, social justice. Tens of millions of demonstrators in the streets and squares against dictatorship, corruption, impoverishment and reactionary policies. Women dreaming of freedom and equality with men in wages, education, inheritance and public employment. Ethnic and religious minorities dream of political representation in parliaments and central governments. Young people in their twenties dreaming of a better future.

Ten years of a fertile environment for leftist thought to flourish. To present its progressive visions, gains popularity, organises its ranks and present to the masses an alternative to the two poles of the counter-revolution, the military and the Islamists. It presents a popular, progressive alternative with a vision and a socio-political and economic project. Ten years of us "Waiting for Godot".

Waiting for the Arab left that never came, we had to question the reality of the Arab left. Why did it fail to appear and organise the popular movement? Where is it from the global youth movements? Does the coronavirus crisis present an opportunity for the left to present its visions and alternatives to the ruling neoliberal regimes?

To find answers to these questions, Muwatin met with the author of (Eastern Cauldron: Islam, Afghanistan, Palestine and Iraq in a Marxist Mirror), (Marxism, Orientalism and Cosmopolitanism), (The People Want: A Radical Exploration of the Arab Uprising) and (Morbid Symptoms: Relapse in the Arab Uprising). Researcher and academic Gilbert Achcar is a professor at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) at the University of London.

- Marxism is not an empty framework that can be filled with what everyone wants. Rather, it has constants in concepts and values.
- There are Marxist circles different from the Stalinist style that tried to appear in the region but were unable to leave the sidelines despite the opportunity presented by the "Arab Spring".

- The youth movement in Sudan was able to organise itself in a way that rejects centralisation and is keen on horizontality, without rejecting the organisation as a whole.
 - Since 2011, we have entered into a “long-term revolutionary process” that will extend for many years or even decades; after two springs, a third and fourth will come.
 - Islam is neither the “solution” as the Brotherhood sees it, nor is it the “problem,” as some of their opponents see it. The issue is not religious, but rather a question of social, economic and political programmes in which believers and non-believers can meet.
 - If the movement had the ability to seize power, it would have moved from occupying the squares to occupying the positions of power.
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The dialogue:

1-In an interview with the Tunisian site “Nawaat”, Marxism in Arab countries was described as “mummified Marxism.” How do you see the reality of the Arab left today in general?

Arab Marxism is mostly mummified for several reasons, the most important of which is due to its historical formation. For a very long time, the so-called Marxism in the Arab region was dominated by a type of “Marxism” mummified in origin, which is what was called “Soviet Marxism”, or what can be called Stalinism, which is a metamorphosis of Marxism.

There are certainly exceptions, as there are creative Arab Marxist contributions to the field of research, although some of them were written abroad in languages other than Arabic, such as the productions of Samir Amin or Anwar AbdulMalik.

There are also contributions that have developed within the scope of the Arab communist movement, the most prominent and most important of which is the contribution of Mahdi Amel, with his distinguished creative thought and endeavour. But the exceptions confirm the rule. In general, the organised political movements that claimed Marxism in the Arab region were characterised by superficiality and vulgarity. This shallowness contributes to explaining the bankruptcy reached by groups claiming to speak in the name of Marxism in the Arab region by the end of the 20th century.

The remnants of that mummified Marxism are still prevalent in the region so far, evidenced by the anti-revolutions that took place within the framework of the Arab Spring, including the Syrian revolution in particular. We have seen many so-called Marxists and leftists supporting the Syrian regime, even though it is based on outrageous brutality and exploitation.

We are faced with cases claiming Marxism, but are very far from its essence. I do not say this as a matter of claiming a monopoly on genuine Marxism, but there is a clear difference between claiming a monopoly on the only correct interpretation of a complex intellectual system, and defining the intellectual frameworks within which this intellectual system moves and within which the discussion can take place.

Marxism is not an empty framework that can be filled by what everyone wants. Rather, it has constants in concepts and values. In fact, the values of democracy, freedom and equality are basic values in Marx’s thought, and their contradiction constitutes a departure from Marxism, no matter what the outsiders claim.

2- The left failed to seize the opportunity of the Arab Spring revolutions to be able to mobilise the poor and marginalised. What are the reasons that led to this failure? Why did the left fail to “be a leftist”, as you say?

The reason is what I mentioned about the weight of the Soviet Stalinist tradition in the Arab region, which in many cases led the Arab Communist Parties to support dictatorships. We have seen the Syrian Communist Party participate in the government of the Assad regime, the Iraqi Communist Party participate in the government of the Baathist regime, and the Egyptian Communist Party fused into the Socialist Union, the ruling party in the Nasser era.

All these “communist” parties have flouted the freedom and democracy for which true Marxists are supposed to be at the forefront of the struggle. In fact, how can certain parties be true advocates of democracy when they are already subservient to the police bureaucratic system that existed in the Soviet Union?

Of course, there are Marxist circles different from the Stalinist style that tried to appear in the region but were unable to leave the sidelines despite the opportunity provided by the “Arab Spring”. This was a great opportunity: in Egypt, for example, the “January 25 Revolution” 2011 was characterised by the progressiveness of the general trend of its slogans and youth mobilisation. Of course, there was more than one political current within the popular movement, but the youth movement that initiated and moved the events between 2011 and 2013 was left-oriented, albeit spontaneously, rather than ideologically crystallised.

We saw a political expression of this youth movement in the first round of the 2012 Egyptian presidential elections, which was manifested by voting for Hamdeen Sabahi, who at that time represented a leftist, democratic and patriotic programme and won third place in the number of votes, almost matching what the falool and Brotherhood candidates obtained. This was an expression of the existence of a great progressive popular energy, and the youth stood at the forefront with values that the left always represented, such as those summed up in the slogan “bread, freedom, social justice.”

All of this was done in the absence or severe weakness of regulatory frameworks, and in the use of social media, which partially compensated for the weakness of the actual organisational networks. These outlets allowed organising demonstrations and other methods of movement, but they did not allow to go any further in imposing popular demands, whether through elections or revolutionary methods.

And since the forces of the left were unable to organise the movement in the first “Arab Spring” of 2011 in all its arenas, the result was that the youth movement that initiated the revolution was marginalised, and progressive trends were marginalised. The conflict between two anti-revolutionary poles, the old regime and the Muslim Brotherhood, dominated the political scene in various arenas, and this conflict took various forms in different countries.

3- Why is the left unable to find a third path between the two poles of the counter-revolution, that is, the ruling regimes and the Islamists?

The answer to this question is related to your previous question, as the first condition for the left to be able to play such a role lies in the left being truly leftist so that it can embody the third pole on the scene, i.e., the revolutionary pole, in the face of the two poles of the regime and the Brotherhood. But conditions changed between the first and second “springs”.

In 2011, the “Revolution-Brotherhood-Old Regime” triangle was the prevailing situation at the

beginning in the arenas of the “Arab Spring,” until the revolutionary trend was marginalised within two years, so that the struggle was limited to the two anti-revolutionary poles.

As for the “Second Arab Spring” of 2019, which included Sudan, Algeria, Iraq and Lebanon, we note the absence of a prominent role for religious puritanical movements comparable to their role in the first spring. Rather, we note that religious currents are an integral part of the authorities against which the uprisings rose in the four countries, and this is a qualitative difference.

In Sudan, al-Bashir’s rule was a military regime that cooperated with religious currents. In Algeria, the Brotherhood cooperated with Bouteflika’s rule, which made them lose credibility. In Iraq and Lebanon, armed religious groups affiliated with Iran are the most important pillars of the regime. Therefore, the revolutionary current was not at risk of falling into the trap of allying with one of the anti-revolutionary poles against the other, as happened during the first “Arab Spring”. This is a natural result of the failure of that first experience, as revolutionary processes are cumulative processes in terms of political experience, and the revolutionary forces have realised the danger of dissolving their identity.

However, the dilemma of organising remains, that is, the task of organising the progressive, spontaneous, youthful and popular state. In Algeria, for example, the movement was impressive, but it remained helpless in the face of the army, in the absence of a party that could speak in its name. I do not mean here a hierarchical organisational framework, but any form of organised coordination capable of speaking in the name of the popular movement.

The same thing was not available in Lebanon and Iraq, which explains the failure of these two uprisings so far. As for the only exception that constitutes a very important experience, it is Sudan, where the youth movement was able to organise itself through “resistance committees” that include large numbers, in an organisational manner characterised by the rejection of centralisation in order to avoid repetition of the bad experiences of the traditional central party, which all led to bureaucracy and authoritarian centralisation. Rather, the Sudanese youth movement is keen on horizontality, without this implying the rejection of the organisation as a whole, and the “resistance committees” have entrusted the role of the political leadership of the popular movement to the “Sudanese Professionals Association,” while maintaining its oversight over it. Together, the two parties constitute the backbone of the Sudanese revolution, which is still going through a fraught transitional phase.

There are, then, qualitative differences between the two springs in the superiority of the second over the first in terms of political content and the superiority of the organisational situation in Sudan over all other uprisings. We will see what will come, but the important thing is that since 2011, we have entered, at the level of the entire Arab region, what I called a “long-term revolutionary process” that will extend for many years, even decades. After the two springs, a third and fourth will come, and if the experiment continues in that cumulative and qualitatively ascending manner, the hope will remain that the desired change will be achieved in the end.

4- Classical Orientalism and Reverse Orientalism are the two ideas that dominate the minds of most Arab intellectuals, how do we get out of the idea that religion is the essence of Islamic identity so that we can read religion in light of sociology and history?

As I emphasized more than once, Islam is not the “solution” as the Brotherhood sees it, nor is it the “problem” as some of their opponents see it. The issue is not a religious issue, but rather a question of social, economic and political programmes around which believers and non-believers can meet.

The regimes of social and economic oppression can be secular, religious, or somewhere in between.

They can and should be confronted with liberation programs on which a wide spectrum of forces meet, from the leftist Marxist to the progressive Islamic, which is capable of separating religion from the state.

The issue is not a matter of religion, but a matter of specific goals in freedom, democracy, and social and economic issues, on which the fronts and movements are based that unite all those who support it, whatever their beliefs regarding religion. The freedom that must be achieved must include the freedom of belief as a cornerstone of its pillars, and this includes the freedom of religion of all kinds as well as the freedom of atheism.

5- The youth of Europe and the United States are working on both the theoretical and practical levels, to formulate a new revolutionary movement suitable for our times. What prevents the youth of the Arab left, at the time of the digital revolution and modern means of communication, from participating in this formulation and joining the global youth revolutionary?

Since the first Arab Spring, the youth movement has been characterised by the use of technology and digital tools for communication, and it has been influenced by a progressive youth global culture, which we have seen reach its peak recently, represented by the globalisation of protest movements launched from the United States.

This is the case, for example, of the “Me too” movement to combat sexual harassment, as well as the “Black lives matters” movement against the racism triggered by the killing of George Floyd. The example presented by the “Arab Spring” in 2011 had a similar global impact, through the model shaped by the occupation of Tahrir Square in Cairo for the whole world, and various movements were inspired by it, including the “Occupy” movement that spread in the United States.

But the stage of ‘squares’, for which our region is famous is a preliminary stage and does not constitute a sufficient model for changing the authority. What is the meaning of occupation of the field? It means pressure on the authority for a change from within, and if the movement had the ability to seize power, it would have moved from occupying the squares to occupying the positions of power.

Occupying the squares is a negative strategy and staying at their borders is evidence of inability. The revolution needs more than that. It requires an organised popular movement, framed, capable of moving from what is called the war of positions to the war of movement or manoeuvre, targeting the positions of power. This does not currently exist in our region, but the Sudanese case has made great strides in this direction.

6- In light of the Corona crisis and the difficulties faced by societies with regard to the capacity of the health system and providing the basic needs of citizens, added to the economic losses that the state will cover in the end. Do you see that the crisis shows a great flaw in the capitalist system in its neo-liberal form?

Covid-19, the pandemic that we are dealing with, is a product of globalisation in the sense of the great increase in the movement of people and goods on a global scale, but it is primarily a product of industrial civilisation in its highest stage and the devastation it has caused by humans on nature and the environment. In this regard, the Soviet Union also contributed to creating the conditions for the crisis. And the conditions of the environment are miserable in present-day Russia, and China, which is not neoliberal, is one of the major polluters.

The Coronavirus is nature’s reaction to humans who created the causes of the emergence and

spread of new epidemics by reaping their nature. Governments have begun to realise the seriousness of the environmental issue and are concerned with it since the beginning of our current century, but what they have agreed upon and implemented so far remains far below what is required. Before the pandemic, we witnessed an important rise in environmental awareness amongst young people, which is a very good thing, and we can expect this awareness to increase significantly in light of the pandemic and its effects. This awareness must clash with neoliberalism, because what is required to save our planet contrasts sharply with neoliberalism, which is based on freedom of trade, the transfer of capital, and the principle of profit as a single driver.

7- Will the world turn left after the Corona crisis ends? At least in the provision of basic needs of health, shelter, food and warmth?

Neoliberal policies led to a reduction in public expenditures, including health expenditures, especially in more neoliberal countries such as Britain and the United States, seriously deepening the gap between the rich and the poor in health. However, the pandemic showed the wealthy that epidemics do not stop at the border between the rich and the poor. Of course, the rich have much greater means of treatment than the poor, but in the face of a disease that has no cure, as Covid-19 is until today, everyone is equal.

Consequently, the capitalists realised that the neoliberal health policy that they had followed for decades had turned against them by facilitating the outbreak of the most serious economic crisis in a century, if we exclude the stage of the Second World War. Thus, the pandemic has shown the extent to which neoliberalism has been a disaster for humanity, but this does not mean that it will fade away on its own due to the pandemic. It has become certain that governments will greatly increase public health expenditures, but they will maintain the other aspects of neoliberal policies in all fields. These policies will only fall if the anti-political movements develop and change regimes.

8- Are regimes, totalitarian and non-totalitarian, taking advantage of the Corona crisis in order to impose greater control over their citizens? Censorship that may threaten the concept of freedom?

The pandemic was a blow to the struggles that were taking place in various countries, but it did not last long. More dangerous than the pandemic is what it revealed about the possibilities of using modern technology to tighten control over people.

The technology that we have of our time can be likened to that imagined by George Orwell and that allows authority to watch you wherever you go. Undercover political action has become almost impossible with the regimes acquiring these technologies. But this technology is a double-edged sword, as it can be used in the struggle against power, as we have seen in many cases. And no matter how the authorities tried to control the electronic field, the intelligence of young people managed to breach the surveillance. The future is not necessarily a nightmare, and the possibilities and energies still allow hope for progressive change, but it depends on the ability of revolutionary movements to devise forms of organisation appropriate for our times.

Gilbert Achcar

Mohamed Helal

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P.S.

Dialogues

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