

Interview

On the Left, the intellectuals, the Arab Spring and one's history

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Aijaz Ahmad is the author of many influential books on literature, politics, and cultural theory, including *In Theory*, *Lineages of the Present*, and *In Our Time: Empire, Politics, Culture*. He is also one of the more perceptive commentators on current events (and U.S. imperialism) as a contributor to *Frontline* and *Newsclick*. Dr. Ahmad corresponded with us through email to discuss the history and status of leftist publishing, the Arab Spring, and his own formation as a thinker, writer, and political activist.

Michael Schapira - Can you describe the function of institutions like Verso and the *New Left Review* in gathering a unique constellation of social theorists? What role do you think publishing institutions like these have for a younger generation of critics and theorists who confront a more fractured media and publishing landscape?

Aijaz Ahmad - You have referred to *NLR*. We should also think of *Monthly Review* (*MR*), which came earlier, in the United States itself, in the desolate moment of McCarthyism in fact. There have of course been other journals of the Left, even Marxist Left, but these two histories are special, not only because of the regularity and longevity of the journals but also because each established, on either side of the Atlantic, a publishing house of its own with distinctive standpoints.

Before the Second World War, Britain and the U.S. had significant communist parties and militant labour movements, much more so than today, but no significant homegrown tradition of Marxist theory beyond some individuals and small groups. This was even more true of the U.S. than of Britain. Until the campus explosions of the 1960s there was hardly any coherent Marxist teaching in the American universities. Pre-War radicalism was in fact suppressed very successfully with the onset of McCarthyism and the Cold War.

In that atmosphere of hysteria and witch-hunt, the founding of *Monthly Review* was an extraordinary event. The founders were loudly Marxist, but had also broken with theories and practices associated with the Soviet Union since the rise of Stalin. They defied McCarthyism by making no secret of their support for anti-capitalist movements around the world. And, they came with the ambition of founding, within the United States, a powerful intellectual tradition of Marxist thought. For them, this enterprise had three components: (1) theory of capitalism as classical Marxism had conceived of it and as it had become in their own time; (2) analyses of U.S. economy and class structure in its actual workings, decade by decade; and (3) theory of imperialism, facts of imperialist wars, and issues related to anti-imperialist resistance and socialist construction across the globe. Over roughly half a century, they assembled a magnificent archive that served to help raise the intellectual level

of the left.

Across the Atlantic, the career of *NLR* as we now know it began when Perry Anderson became its editor — an event that Anderson himself has described, humorously, as a takeover executed by “the cadet corps of 1968.” If *MR* had arisen in the dark night of McCarthyism, *NLR* rose on a wave of extraordinary revolutionary optimism. Well before the founding of *NLR*, Britain had acquired a powerful tradition of Marxist thought and a widespread leftwing intellectual culture, especially in the postwar years. *NLR* contributed to strengthening that tradition in many ways. A distinctive contribution of *NLR*, and of Verso which came somewhat later, is that it brought into the English language a large body of highly sophisticated Continental thought that was either directly Marxist — Gramsci, Althusser and so on — or very closely allied with Marxism, as in the case of Badiou, or more broadly on the Left and of great merit.

What is the function of such journals and their publishing houses? How has it changed over time? Well, when Marxism suddenly arrived as a serious academic subject in American universities, in the aftermath of the 1960s campus explosions, archives assembled by these two journals and their publishing houses proved to be a major resource for teaching at a very high level of theoretical integrity and academic engagement. There have been many, many other resources, but the example of these two can be used to illustrate how theoretical projects of this kind can be crucial for the intellectual formation of students, thinkers, and militants of a later moment. This is something the younger generation of critics and theorists owes to “1968”. They have inherited a much wider intellectual culture of the left than was available in the U.S. or even Britain before “1968”. And, to the extent that English is now the primary language in global communication, such journals serve an intellectual function not only on national levels but also on a global level.

Has this function changed for a younger generation of critics and theorists? Is the media and publishing landscape more “fractured”? I am not sure what that means. Does the question refer to radically new technologies of communication and dissemination, and therefore the form of the journal or the book; or does it refer to some kind of generational shift in the very needs of younger critics and theorists? Certainly, excellent Marxist work is now published by great many more journals and publishing houses; and the centrality of any one has declined correspondingly. The left now includes many more strands than Marxism, and Marxism itself is being thought in many distinct modes, leading to very complex conversations. And the internet of course facilitates something resembling a global conversation. A lot of all that is circulating on the net, virtually every print journal finds it necessary to be available on the net, and some very high-caliber political analyses from the Left are produced only on the net. Serious theoretical journals could doubtless be produced exclusively in the electronic medium, without going through the intermediation of print. But that is no more significant than people (such as myself) who used to write with pencils and pens learning word processing.

However, has the book been replaced by the web? I don’t think so. Progressively through the 20th century, film emerged as the most widely disseminated form of narrative, whether fictional or documentary, but it did not replace either the novel or the research monograph. Hundreds of millions go to movies but the astonishing fact is that more people are reading novels in this electronic age than ever before in history. Journals of the kind we are discussing perform a very special kind of task that requires a great deal of intellectual labour. Technological reproduction has become easier and more various in its forms, but the theoretical labour of production itself has become more complex, partly because the field of knowledge keeps widening very fast. Young critics will have to engage with this fact. How much of it is done on paper and how much through any other medium is immaterial.

Over the course of your career you’ve written in a number of different registers. For

example, in pieces for *Frontline* like “Autumn of the Patriarchs” [Available on ESSF (article 25208), [Arab Region: Autumn of the patriachs](#).]] there is a real urgency in trying to capture events in real time while developing broad themes (e.g. the challenge to Westocentric myths about the capacity of Muslims to initiate democratic self-reform). Yet you have also written more reflective pieces like your remembrance of Michael Spinker in the *New Left Review*. While history never slows down (especially if we take into account its proper geographical sweep), do you find yourself more easily falling into one mode or the other as a result of the relative calmness or tumultuousness of the times?

Michael Sprinker was a close personal friend, a commissioning editor at Verso and very much a part of the milieu at the *NLR*. So, when the editor of *NLR* asked me to write something in his memory I readily agreed. That kind of personal writing is very rare and uncharacteristic of me.

My original grounding as a writer was actually not in the English language but in Urdu, and not in political writing or the social sciences but in literature — poetry and fiction more than literary criticism. Even political writing came first in Urdu and only later in English. I think I have carried some of those “registers” — those stylistic habits — into English, a matter clearer to me as author and bilingual being than it might be to a unilingual reader.

Some other “registers” come out of the fact that I am both an academic scholar and a political activist. In my theoretical writings, I have no inhibition about the meandering compound sentence, for example, and actually love the complexities and rhythms of it. My *Frontline* essays, by contrast, are deliberately composed at the cusp of journalism and political analysis, for a mass-circulation magazine. They require a different kind of prose. I also do other kinds of writing, in even simpler registers, which don’t circulate outside India. These shifts in register have to do with one’s sense of one’s own responsibility toward various forces in society that one is involved in. And they have to do with what one is writing about.

Even in my theoretical writings, though, I have such a strong prejudice in favour of intelligibility that some people in U.S. universities think that I don’t really know much about theory. My view is that one should use technical terms only when necessary, and one should try to achieve complexity of thought with as little academic jargon as possible. I am an avid reader and frequent teacher of people like Hegel and Marx, so I am not opposed to difficult prose as such. However, the difficulty of prose should not greatly exceed the complexity of the thought contained in it, as is the case with much of what passes for theory these days. This is one of the great lessons of poetry as such. Poetry teaches us that it is possible to achieve depth, complexity, eloquence, intellectual challenge, emotional and aesthetic effect with very fine and lively economies of language.

Many of the thinkers of your generation had a focal event to organize their political projects. For post-Althusarians like Rancière and Badiou it was May ’68. For others it was their experience in post-colonial constellations (or in your case, a resistance to much post-colonial discourse, as demonstrated in *In Theory*). But you also have what Francis Mulhern has called the “franc-tireur” tradition of critics like Noam Chomsky and David Harvey, who tend to be more diffuse in their thinking because this focal event is not present. Do you think that the Occupy Movement or the Arab Spring have the capacity to serve as these focal events that will retain a hold on a new generation of thinkers for years to come? And if so, do you imagine a differentiation in thinking between, say, participants in these movements, smaller national movements like the Indignados in Spain or the mass protests in Chile, and those perhaps witnessing events from a distance?

Perhaps because I come from outside the Euro-American zones, I have never lacked events. One of my earliest memories, as a toddler, is that of the Indian flag going up in my village on the day of our

Independence from British colonialism. A few years after that, my family bought its first radio set because it wanted to follow news of the Algerian War of Independence. American invasions and slaughters, from Korea to Vietnam to Afghanistan to Iraq, have been to me a continuum — a perpetual Event, so to speak. Even for what I generally designate as “1968” Paris is only one reference point; the Chinese Cultural Revolution, the Tet Offensive, overthrow of the dictatorship in Pakistan, the uprising in Mexico, etc., loom much larger. The unique status of “May 68” for Badiou and Rancière strikes me as a very charming instance of French provincialism.

I don’t think there is anything “diffuse” about Chomsky’s thinking or writing. His political engagement began with his revulsion against the Vietnam War and the way it was being legitimized by liberal scholarship and media ideologues. He has never deviated from that kind of work in relation to all corners of the world that have been subjected to those processes. And, he has never departed from his lifelong commitment to that variant of Anarchism that he rightly calls “libertarian socialism.” All this he does in very clear prose. I have a number of local, minor disagreements with Chomsky, but his prose or commitments or intellect are anything but “diffuse”.

My sense is that if you can be inspired into left-wing commitments only by the passing excitement of a transitional historical moment — May ’68, Arab uprising, Chilean student movement — you are more likely to settle back into inertia and nostalgia. If, however, your main motivation is the sense of outrage at cruelty and injustice — fascism, imperialism, what capitalism does to the vast majority of human beings — then you may not need the stimulation of good news to keep yourself going in what then becomes for you an obligation.

This is perhaps a strange and silly question, but where and when was it easiest for you to be a Marxist (or at least to be identified as a Marxist) and where and when has it been the most difficult?

It is easiest to be a Marxist when one is dealing with things that are properly the object of Marxist theory and practice. It is very difficult to explain to people that there are lots of things in life and the world on which Marxism as such has no opinion, let alone a position. One difficulty I used to face in being a Marxist was of a theological kind, when I came upon things in Marx — consequential things — that I thought were wrong, but would not want to permit myself to really reject. I have overcome the slavish nature of that difficulty quite some time ago and I have learned to treat his errors as errors, with a shrug of the shoulder, unless someone can show me that I am the one in error. However, I am not altogether unhappy for having had that reverential attitude, or having had to fight against it. I think that respect, genuine and deep respect, for one’s masters is a very necessary attribute in the intellectual formation of people who want to become serious thinkers.

The most common difficulty, really just an irritation, in being a Marxist is in having to deal with other people’s assumptions about oneself. Religious people assume that I would have contempt for religion; devotees of Dalai Lama think that I would be pro-China. Then there is what you might call the American academic situation, the self-censorship in the teaching situation, which I have had to often negotiate. Being a Marxist is acceptable, even fashionable, so long as you stay away from things like “proletariat,” “class struggle,” “communism,” etc., or treat these as figures of thought, not as social categories that require certain kinds of political action. How do you do that if you are a serious Marxist? This is not a serious problem for me because I do such teaching only on a visiting basis and don’t have any stakes in the profession. But I sympathize with the predicament of those who do have such stakes. A common refuge is in “early Marx,” the nice guy Marx.

We recently ran a series where we distributed a questionnaire based on a 1939 edition of the *Partisan Review* entitled “The Situation in American Writing.” [\[1\]](#) In it we asked contemporary writers (mostly American, with a few British authors mixed in) whether

literature had any responsibility to respond to current global upheavals, and many were very hesitant to respond affirmatively. Do you find this surprising?

No, I don't find this surprising. The phrase that would bother most writers is probably "responsibility to respond," and this would include some writers who would in fact often respond. The question is: do you have the "responsibility" to do so, something on the order of Kant's moral imperative? Dennis Brutus, a famous poet and great veteran of anti-apartheid struggles, gave an interesting answer: it is my duty as a citizen but not as a writer. Now, a lot of his poetry in fact is highly political, and the objective fact is that it was impossible for him to observe any kind of permanent separation between his art and his activist's life. So it really depends on the kind of life you live. If you are engaged in the problems of your time your art will respond to it anyway, regardless of whatever idea you may have about artistic freedom.

I can share two more thoughts with you:

In the West, there have been rather interesting mutations. Even if you discount the earlier Christian allegory and so forth, even if you begin with the novels of Voltaire and Rousseau, and then think of Goethe or Hugo or Blake or Shelley or Whitman or Arnold or T.S. Eliot, it was simply assumed for a very, very long time that the writer had a responsibility. In this you could be a political radical like Shelley or a conservative monarchist like Eliot, but you did think that literature had a responsibility. But then something began to change. The period of fascism was I think the last time when Euro-American writers generally, with few exceptions, would have unhesitatingly said that yes, writers do have such a responsibility (whether or not "literature" does).

As the Cold War was just taking off, Sartre could still uphold and defend the idea of "committed" literature. As the Cold War progressed and anti-communism became fashionable in many left circles, that position came under increasing attack and those who launched the attack predictably included luminaries such as Adorno. The phrase "public intellectual" that came into wide left-liberal currency from the 1980s onwards was much weaker. You were no longer expected to be "committed" to one side of the political contestation or the other, but you were urged to sometimes leave your ivory tower and participate in what Habermas was to call "the public sphere."

The above still doesn't bring up the question of "literature" as such, by which one now means things like novels and poetry, the "creative imagination." Well, the prevailing notions about the "creative imagination" are so libertine and romantic, in the bad sense, as to verge on mysticism. "Literature" — and of course its twin, "art" — is now the one area of human expression where the most absolutist idea of freedom prevails; you can say absolutely anything you want, and if anyone objects to your saying it, that person must be an anti-Enlightenment bigot who stands opposed to the most fundamental of all freedoms, namely the right to literary expression. No other kind of writing enjoys such a sacralized space in the collective imagination — not a historian, economist, journalist, politician. In this liturgical atmosphere of virtually divine freedom for literature, speaking of "responsibility" is little short of madness.

In a recent piece for *Frontline* on "the intertwining of revolutionary desire and counterrevolutionary strategies," [2] you discussed the complex dynamics between students (as well as other young militants) and workers in mass movements. In the context of Tunisia and Egypt you wrote that "The militants' almost exclusive focus on obtaining liberal democratic freedoms and their relative lack of engagement with substantive issues of economic freedoms and redistribution of wealth made it easier for the much better organized Islamicists to walk into corridors of power precisely through those electoral processes, while numerically very weak socialist groups were in no way prepared for electoral contests and the rest of the secular forces were largely trapped in the democracy

promotion rhetorics that they had learned from Freedom House etc.” Yet you also note that the majority of current movements are youth driven because of the growing number of educated, yet unemployed young people. Do you see these conditions as eventually bringing students and young militants in line with workers, or is this an enduring tension?

Well, frankly, the article was written hastily and some of my formulations are so opaque as to be at least partially wrong. Seventy percent of Egyptian population is below the age of 30. So, one cannot easily make that kind of distinction between workers and young people; most people who are in the work force are young. At the same time, the category of “workers” has also become very complicated. Neoliberalism has devastated Egyptian agriculture and industry equally, so that majority of the work force is really in what is called the informal sector; and a lot of youth including large sections of the educated youth are in low-income servicing jobs, so that what might appear as white-collar lower middle class is really a new working class of the neoliberal economy. The valid distinction is this: the organized working class was much more focused on class issues; the upper middle class protest was much more focused on issues of dictatorship, human rights etc; but the vast bulk was united on twin issues of authoritarianism and economic deprivation. Among them, the affluent were the most responsive to the Democracy promotion networks organized by the same U.S. which was in fact the real force behind the Mubarak dictatorship.

As for elections: wherever the organized force of the politically conscious and militant people is not strong enough to defeat the power of finance, elections are decided above all by money. The Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafists have been receiving countless millions — probably billions — from the Gulf monarchies for over three decades. These funds made it possible for them to build charities, schools, clinics, shelters, etc. all over Egypt and thus turn an immense mass of pauperized population in rural as well as urban areas into a network of clients. Over time, these networks also became the social base for new kinds of popular piety. The Brotherhood had been participating in elections under the previous regime as well, and therefore had a well-oiled electoral machine across the country. The new forces unleashed in the course of the revolution itself could not possibly match such financial and organizational resources. That is the real secret behind the Islamicist electoral sweep.

As to your question about future possibilities, there is now a clear demarcation. On the one hand is the right-wing bloc consisting of the army, the leftovers from Mubarak’s political machine, and the Islamicists. On the other side, you have the various forces of the organized and unorganized workers, unemployed and semi-employed youth, women, radicalized sections of the middle and lower middle classes, etc. There are contradictions inside both these blocs but this basic polarization has taken place. There is still some popular sympathy for the Brotherhood because they too had suffered under Mubarak and did play a significant role in the popular uprising. However, they have taken consistently strong positions against all kinds of working class agitation — in the name of “national production” — and they want the big demonstrations taking place now to drop all other demands and focus exclusively on the issue of transfer of power to the elected parliament, which they can control. They are losing their credibility quite fast.

And, yes, there is a growing unity among the other popular forces. Whatever compromise is worked out between the army and the Brotherhood, the new dispensation will not be markedly different, all the neoliberal policies will remain in place and none of the key problems shall be solved. That should lead to greater unity among those who did so much to organize the successful uprising, sacrificed so much, but got nothing out of it. One of the encouraging signs is that organizations among them are growing rapidly, representing various social forces, so that the hard work of what you may call “the organization of spontaneity” would be easier in the future. But it is a long, drawn-out process and what happens there will also depend on the international context.

Aijaz Ahmad

P.S.

* <http://www.full-stop.net/2012/05/01/interviews/michael-schapira/aijaz-ahmad/>

Footnotes

[1] <http://www.full-stop.net/category/features/the-situation/>

[2] <http://www.frontlineonnet.com/fl2902/stories/20120210290200400.htm>