

THE ARAB SPRING

“The People Want” - “We are witnessing a revolutionary shock wave which covers a particular region”

Tuesday 16 April 2013, by [ACHCAR Gilbert](#), [BABEL Jacques](#) (Date first published: 1 April 2013).

Gilbert Achcar spoke to Jacques Babel about his forthcoming book on the Arab revolt due out in paperback in English in June.

Jacques Babel – Why have you entitled your book simply “The People Want”?

Gilbert Achcar – This formula, “the people want”, has been used in recent movements to express all kinds of demands, from the most basic to the famous “the people want to overthrow the regime”, the best-known slogan of the general uprising. Originally, this comes from two verses of a very famous Tunisian poet, which are in the conditional tense, whereas the affirmation is in the present tense. What the slogan reveals is the emergence of the people as a collective will on the public stage, the people as a political subject. A large mass of individuals who for decades lived under conditions of despotism is now entering into a revolutionary era which - as I constantly stress - is in its infancy. It is a long-term revolutionary process.

You deal extensively with “the particular modalities of capitalism in the Arab region”.

We are witnessing a revolutionary shock wave which covers a particular region. This indicates that there are common specific factors in the region concerned, which have to be analyzed. In a Marxist approach, we are not going to settle for the explanations that refer to cultural factors or to the fact that there are uprisings against despotic regimes. These factors exist, certainly, but they do not explain why this explosion has become general in this way and at this moment of history.

In a Marxist approach, you explore the physical roots of the explosion, the socio-economic factors underpinning what is happening. This is the approach that I have taken and I show that there is common to the region a dismal socio-economic situation, with world record unemployment rates held for several decades.

This is not the conjunctural crisis that we have in Europe, due in particular to German economic policy. This has been going on for a long time and testifies to a blockage of development which is particular to the region, even when you compare it to other regions of the Afro-Asian ensemble, as I do in the book. The question that arises is: what are the reasons for this blockage? They do not reside in capitalism in general: by explaining everything, this explains nothing. The reasons for the blockage are to be found in the particular modalities of capitalism, of the mode of production, of the relationship between the economic and the political in this part of the world. In any case, this is

what I try to show.

You speak about the rentier and clientelist regimes that have stifled these societies...

It is a question of rentier and patrimonial states and of a crony capitalism, politically determined, where the dominant share does not depend on the "laws of the market" as the ideal model of capitalism would have it, but rather on collusion and connections with the regime. All this produces a blockage which has been becoming steadily worse for decades.

For quite some time now we could feel the explosion coming and see a social agitation manifesting itself wherever it could, wherever repression did not make it impossible. We have seen a rise in social struggles, especially in the two countries where everything started: Tunisia and Egypt are countries which experienced in the decades that preceded the current explosion an obvious rise of social struggles, and especially struggles that reflected this explosive potential, which eventually exploded. The self-immolation of the young Bouazizi was the spark that detonated a situation which was very obviously highly explosive in the whole of the region.

A widespread idea asserts that the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions have been suffocated by the reactionary Islamic forces...

This is a perception that prevailed after the elections, in Tunisia and then in Egypt, resulted in the coming to power of fundamentalist forces, forces which had made religion their stock in trade. But I believe that today many of those who let themselves be seduced by the religious discourse are disappointed. This is shown by the scale of resistance to the new governments that have come from the fundamentalist movement, and even the continuation, indeed the rise of the social movement in the two countries concerned: Tunisia and Egypt. Moreover, do not lose sight of Libya, where the elections were proportionally much more massive, and resulted in a defeat of the fundamentalists.

In Egypt and Tunisia, where there were victories of fundamentalists which obviously have to be put into perspective, especially in the Tunisian case, the populations are very quickly realizing the inability of these governments to manage the situation, to provide even the beginning of a solution to the social crisis that is the fundamental problem. People have overthrown regimes not only because they wanted democracy and freedom, as is claimed: the movement started off, both in Tunisia and Egypt, on social grounds, with clear social demands, on employment, on social justice, on the high cost of living.

The demands were very clear, and it is on this level, which is the basic driving force of the explosion in the region, that the fundamentalists have no solution, no response. They just continue the economic policies and perpetuate the socio-economic structures that existed previously. They just continue the same relationships with international financial institutions. They accept the conditions of the IMF, with as much zeal as the regimes that were overthrown. This produces what we can see: after this first stage of the regional revolutionary process, we are already seeing emerge the contours of their failure. The crucial question that arises, therefore, is what type of alternative can emerge.

On Libya and the Syria, many people say that these uprisings have been taken over by imperialism and are only leading to chaos and despair.

Let's talk first about Libya. We heard a lot, after the intervention of NATO, that the uprising had changed its nature. And some people even drew the conclusion that Gaddafi should be supported. However, the Libyan uprising demonstrated an acute awareness of its sovereignty by refusing, early on, any intervention of international troops on the ground. What overthrew the Gaddafi regime was

the civil war in the country, the insurrection in Tripoli. NATO certainly contributed to the military victory of the insurrection, but it was the insurrection that won.

When there is the overthrow of a dictatorship of the totalitarian kind that has been in place for more than forty years, of an autocracy with a pronounced grotesque aspect, when such a regime is crumbling under the blows of a mass uprising, there is always an anarchic and chaotic situation created. Every revolution experiences that. You can handle the situation if there is a centralized leadership of the revolutionary uprising, or if the regime has been brought down by a disciplined revolutionary army. This was obviously not the case in Libya.

In the absence of leaderships that correspond to what we would wish from a progressive point of view, so much the better in the present conditions of political underdevelopment of Libyan society, because of what it lived through for forty years. Today, there is a tremendous effervescence in the country, in which the media are absolutely not interested. Over and above the chaotic situation created by the armed militias - but this has been experienced in many situations, particularly in Lebanon in 1976, when the army collapsed in the first phase of the civil war - the security situation is remarkably moderate compared with what might have been feared. It was being said "This will be another Somalia", and that is far from being the case.

There is a social movement that is emerging, continuous political demands, political protests, including against the armed groups, a veritable explosion of newspapers, of means of expression, of public discussion. There is even a movement of women, and a federation of independent unions that has arisen, linked with the one in Egypt. The balance sheet is really interesting. Having said that, it is difficult to say how things will evolve. What is certain is that there has been a major opening up of the situation in Libya.

And Syria?

The attitude of the Western powers in the Syrian case is very different. You only have to compare the posturing of Sarkozy on Libya, full of hypocrisy, and the absence of posturing on the part of Holland on Syria. And this is not a question of a fundamental difference between their policies. The issues at stake are not the same, nor are the risks and costs. In both cases there is a desire of the Western powers to reach an agreement with the regime. They tried to do that until the final days in Libya, by negotiating with Gaddafi's son. This is what they have been trying to do for two years in Syria.

That is why they refuse to deliver weapons. Washington has refused so far any delivery of weapons. Recently, there is apparently the beginning of an American green light for the allies of Washington in the region to send weapons, in response to the obstinacy of Bashar al Assad, who persists in refusing a negotiated solution whose first condition would be his own resignation. We can see the result.

This attitude of the Western powers, faced with Russia and Iran which fully support the regime, has helped that regime massacre quietly for two years. The figure of 70,000 dead is cited. Many people say that there are many more. The number of refugees is extraordinary. The situation is absolutely terrible. When we say 70,000 dead, this means that the number of injured is much greater. This is an absolutely tragic situation and there is a criminal complicity of Western powers dictated by their own interests, their own strategic considerations.

The same mistrust that they had towards the Libyan uprising, they have towards the Syrian uprising, and even more so, considering the geographical situation of the country. It is this criminal attitude of imperialism that should be denounced if you want to be anti-imperialist, and not the insurgency, as some people are doing.

So what hopes are there for this process in the long term?

From the analysis that I make of the uprising, the logical conclusion is that the only positive outcome would be the emergence of leaderships based on the workers' and popular movement, with a programme of a progressive nature, centred on the satisfaction of social needs and able to engage the countries of the region on the path of development, taking into account the multiple dimensions that this term has acquired, a development in which the state plays a central role, in absolute contradiction with the neo-liberal dogmas that dominate throughout the world. The situation differs from one country to the other.

Tunisia is probably the country where this type of alternative is the most likely, potentially at least, considering the role of the UGTT and its combination with the Popular Front, the coalition of the Left in Tunisia which is today at the head of the UGTT. This combination has the potential to be the dominant force in what happens in the country. The Left must work to involve the workers' movement in the political battle and understand the need for the affirmation of an independent left pole, on its social programme, without mixing the banners with oppositions, whether they are liberal or, worse, composed of members of the overthrown regimes. With such allies, you cannot define a programme for a break with neoliberal policies.

The same problem is posed in Egypt, where there is a potential represented by the Popular Current that is led by Sabbahi, the Nasserite candidate who came third in the first round of the presidential election, and the new workers' movement, the Federation of Independent Trade Unions. The same problem is posed, the assertion of a left alternative, which fights on the social terrain, without that being inconsistent with broader alliances for the defence of democratic conquests. It is important to put forward a different socio-economic identity from the liberal oppositions or those linked to the former regime, which all have in common with the fundamentalists in the government to have no alternatives to the socio-economic policies that previously existed. Unless there is the emergence of progressive alternatives, there is a risk that the crisis can lead to reactionary regressions.

In Europe, do we have responsibilities in this regard?

Indeed, the workers' movement, the radical Left in any case, the one that defends an alternative to the system, must forge links with the corresponding forces in the regional uprising. This is not only an internationalist and altruistic duty, it is in the best interest of the European Left itself that what is happening on the other side of the Mediterranean should lead to a social radicalization. Synergies can be established today with the crisis that is shaking Europe and the radicalization that is under way in such countries as Greece and Spain.

P.S.

* Translation International Viewpoint. <http://www.internationalviewpoint.org/>