2011-2013-2016. New Texts Out Now – "Morbid Symptoms: Relapse in the Arab Uprising"

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Gilbert Achcar, *Morbid Symptoms: Relapse in the Arab Uprising* (Stanford: Stanford University Press and London: Saqi, 2016).

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 '23 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 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.

Excerpt from *Morbid Symptoms: Relapse in the Arab Uprising*

The Illusion of the "Arab Spring" (from the introduction).

In the mind of most of its users at the early stage of the Arab uprising, "Arab Spring" was not meant to designate one phase in an open-ended sequence of revolutionary seasons, where autumn and winter were to follow spring and summer. It was rather meant as a one-time political mutation; to use a word related to the same metaphor, it was seen as the long-overdue "blossoming" of democracy in the Arab region. According to this view, Arab-speaking countries were finally, albeit belatedly, joining what Samuel Huntington had identified as the "third wave of democratisation" – a chain of political mutations that started in the 1970s.

The mood was all the more euphoric in 2011 because the Arab uprising happened at a time when the cautious pessimism of the arch-"realist" Huntington looked more and more vindicated. Countering the blissful optimism and Western triumphalism encapsulated in Francis Fukuyama's 1989 "end of history" delusion, Huntington – in his 1991 *The Third Wave* – had warned of the possibility of what he called a "third reverse wave", enumerating its potential causes with much perspicacity. Indeed, on the eve of the Arab upheaval most indicators pointed in that very direction. The 2008 annual report on *Freedom in the World*, produced by the veteran US-based organisation Freedom House,

had already asked worriedly: “Freedom in retreat: is the tide turning?” The question soon became a gloomy assertion: in 2010, the same organisation noted that 2009 was the fourth consecutive year during which “global declines in freedom outweighed gains”. This, were we told, constituted “the longest continuous period of decline for global freedom in the nearly 40-year history of the report”. A fifth consecutive year, 2010, confirmed the sad record.

Hence the deep sigh of relief that the “Arab Spring” occasioned in 2011. The discussion thereafter turned on whether this dramatic sequence of democratic upheavals represented a continuation of the “third wave of democratisation”, or the beginning of a fourth wave, after a short reverse interlude. For not only did “the political uprisings that swept across the Arab world over [that] year represent the most significant challenge to authoritarian rule since the collapse of Soviet communism”, as Freedom House’s report stated, but they were taking place moreover “in a region that had seemed immune to democratic change”. This purported immunity of Arab countries to democracy was widely held by Western pundits to be due to Islam. Huntington himself made that very tendentious observation in his later best-selling book upholding the Bernard Lewis-inspired “clash of civilizations” thesis, where he asserted that “Islamic culture explains in large part the failure of democracy to emerge in much of the Muslim world.”

In 1991, however, the same Huntington could still conjecture that “the wave of democratization that had swept about the world from region to region in the 1970s and 1980s could become a dominant feature of Middle Eastern and North African politics in the 1990s.” This is because *The Third Wave*’s author was still heedful in his appraisal of Islam, asserting that the Islamic doctrine “contains elements that may be both congenial and uncongenial to democracy”. By contrast, Fukuyama, his former student turned challenger, did not bother with nuances: in the 1992 book in which he developed his “end of history” thesis, one finds statements on “Islam” of a staggeringly crude “Orientalist”, i.e. essentialist, character. Islam, without qualification, is said to constitute “a systematic and coherent ideology, just like liberalism and communism” (*sic*) that “has indeed defeated liberal democracy in many parts of the Islamic world, posing a grave threat to liberal practices even in countries where it has not achieved political power directly.” The author sought consolation, however, in the fact that Islam has “virtually no appeal outside those areas that were culturally Islamic to begin with” and that “the Islamic world would seem more vulnerable to liberal ideas in the long run than the reverse”.

In the immediate wake of the attacks of 11 September 2001, Fukuyama went yet further. He observed candidly: “There does seem to be something about Islam, or at least the fundamentalist versions of Islam that have been dominant in recent years, that makes Muslim societies particularly resistant to modernity.” More candid yet in its reproduction of Islamophobic clichés was his dismissal of the “politically correct” view that only a tiny minority of Muslims supported “terrorism”.

The Arab uprising saw Fukuyama, like many others, swing back from that essentialist and demeaning view of Muslims. He suddenly sounded as if he was repudiating what he himself had written over the years. “This change in the Middle East has been incredibly rapid, and it has trumped, for now, old verities about the supposed passivity of Arab culture and the resistance of Islam to modernization”, he asserted in March 2011. In a radio interview two months later, he sounded again as if he was recanting his own previous views, yet without acknowledging it, preferring instead to boast that he was proved right after all in his initial universal optimism.

My referring to Fukuyama here should not be misconstrued as a tribute to the importance of his thinking for our topic. His relevance is rather due to the fact that, since 1989, he has been particularly successful at expressing the mainstream Western *Zeitgeist*. The same ingenuous observation offered above was enunciated innumerable times by countless Western commentators during the first months of 2011. Western academia also joined the fray: theories of “Arab

exceptionalism" were widely "revisited", while the field of "democratisation theory" and "democratic transition" studies entered a period of severe turbulence.

The truth, however, is that the Arab uprising was not – or not only or even primarily – a "democratic transition". The latter turns into a flawed superficial concept when applied indiscriminately to radically different situations, ranging from instances of mere political change to all-encompassing metamorphoses – even though, at first sight, the outcomes of the various sequences of events under scrutiny can be labelled, in part or on the whole, as "democratisation". There is indeed a huge qualitative difference between processes of political regime adaptation to sustained socioeconomic capitalist development eventually requiring and generating a bourgeois-liberal order – such as the processes that took place in Southern Europe, Latin America or East Asia – and a thorough social–political revolution overturning a whole socioeconomic order after a protracted state of developmental blockage, such as happened in Eastern Europe.

And yet, the world was stunned by the great smoothness with which, in general, the overturning of the "Communist" bureaucratic regimes in Eastern Europe happened, although it brought about a metamorphosis of the whole region's socioeconomic order from state-bureaucratic to market-capitalist. The amazement was made all the greater because this happened after decades during which a certain kind of "political science" had decreed that those "totalitarian" regimes were "irreversible". Thus, when it looked as if the Arab regimes were about to crumble in their turn, by a domino effect similar to the one that was set off by the fall of the Berlin Wall, the lingering memory of the "Revolutions of 1989" led observers and actors alike to believe initially that the "Arab Spring" was going to be similarly brief and "peaceful". *Silmiyya, silmiyya!* shouted hopeful demonstrators in Egypt, as well as in Syria – a rallying cry that Barack Obama cited, along with a quote from Martin Luther King, in the short, lyrical speech he gave on the occasion of Hosni Mubarak's downfall.

Regrettably, however, the happy surprise of relative smoothness in 1989 was not repeated in 2011, in spite of all the wishful thinking. Bitter disappointment soon prevailed. Like pre-1989 Eastern Europe, but for longer and with much more acute tensions, the Arab region had experienced a protracted blockage of economic development, but with much direr social consequences. From that angle, the uprisings that started in 2011 in the Arab region were indeed pointing to the pressing need for a thorough social revolution that would overthrow the whole socioeconomic order of the region. Ideally, this would come through radical democratic political change. However, a crucial qualitative difference made it impossible for the Arab uprising to reproduce the pattern of "Velvet Revolution" (as the 1989 revolution in Czechoslovakia was called), which had characterised most of the Eastern European transformation. And that crucial factor is neither religious nor cultural.

The crux of the matter is that the state system that ruled Eastern Europe was very exceptional historically, in that it was dominated not by propertied classes but by party and state bureaucrats, i.e. functionaries and civil servants. The vast majority of those bureaucrats – especially at the lower tiers of the pyramid – could envisage keeping their jobs or finding new ones, and even improving their purchasing power, under market capitalism, while a significant portion of the upper tier could contemplate their own transformation into capitalist entrepreneurs, taking advantage of the privatisation of the economy. Hence the smoothness – astonishing for most observers – with which the socioeconomic order was overturned; although it should not be confused with political democratisation, whose unevenness across the region is determined by a complex set of national and international factors.

Conversely, the pre-2011 Arab region was characterised by the preponderance of patrimonial states in a general economic setting of crony capitalism: not "neopatrimonial" regimes – the mantra of "political science" and international institutions when this concept is correlated with the view that nepotism and corruption are non-intrinsic diseases of Arab governments, which can be cured and

replaced with “good governance” without radically transforming the state – but patrimonial states indeed, be they monarchical or “republican”; in other words, states that have more in common with the European absolutism of yesteryear, the ancien régime in the strict historical sense, than with the modern bourgeois state.

Gilbert Achcar

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P.S.

* http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/25644/new-texts-out-now_gilbert-achcar-morbid-symptoms_r