

Foreword to the third French edition of “The Clash of Barbarisms: The Making of the New World Disorder”

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Today’s reactionaries don’t seem to be interested in a new world war, but in a clash between North and South, rich and poor.

Gilbert Achcar’s book *The Clash of Barbarisms: The Making of the New World Disorder* came out recently in a third French edition. On this occasion, the author wrote and translated a new foreword.

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After the *annus horribilis* that France experienced in 2015, marked by the January and November terror attacks, 2016 seemed to spread this bitter feeling across the globe. The European xenophobic right’s post-Brexit jubilation, the bloody Bastille Day in Nice, which came with a new surge of Islamophobia, the election of the ultra-reactionary demagogue Donald Trump, Aleppo’s martyrdom, Vladimir Putin’s triumph: enough to make you wretch with the nightmarish feeling of living through a new version of last century’s interwar years.

At the very outset of the present century, in the wake of the September 11 attacks, I wrote the first edition of this book. The diagnosis-prognosis that its title revealed can be summarized as follows: the conjunction of neoliberalism’s devastating social effects and the United States’ imperialist greed following its Cold War victory created a fertile ground for a new release of the barbaric tendencies inherent to each cultural area, which were countered and repressed by the civilizational process during the first post-1945 decades. Instead of this progressive dialectic, a reactionary one was set in motion, in which opposing barbarisms reinforce each other and the violence of the strong stirs up the asymmetric violence of the weak.

During the fifteen years since then, this clash has only worsened. The Bush administration’s rapacity let the barbarism of the American military go unchecked. It thus allowed Al Qaeda’s brutality to root itself in Iraq and establish the precursor of the abominable “Islamic State.” In 2014, the latter managed to seize vast swathes of both Iraq and Syria in reaction to the barbarism of Bashar al-Assad and of regional forces manipulated by Iran.

Those fifteen years have also seen the emergence of a neo-czarist Russia led by Vladimir Putin, whose brutal, macho cynicism won him the admiration of the whole spectrum of populist and

nationalist right-wing forces, from Silvio Berlusconi to Marine Le Pen, Donald Trump, François Fillon, Beppe Grillo, Nigel Farage, Viktor Orbán, Benjamin Netanyahu, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Rodrigo Duterte, and many others of the same ilk or worse. At the height of this global reaction, the United States, once the last resort against Nazism, elected the most unpredictable leader to seize the helm of a great power since Adolf Hitler. And if today, by an odd historic reversal, Angela Merkel's Germany represents "centrism" and "moderation" in world politics, it is unfortunately no match for the United States's swing to the far right, not to mention the precariousness of the situation in Germany itself.

Compared to this planetary lurch away from the *longue durée*'s civilizational process and the values it promoted — cosmopolitanism, political liberalism, feminism, antiracism, gender equality — how important is the terroristic barbarism deployed on behalf of a deadly, exclusivist interpretation of Islam that bears the name ISIS? From a historical perspective, ISIS will mainly appear as a formidable catalyst of opposed and stronger barbarisms. Its own barbarism will play straight man to the rise of a whole set of currents that belong to the political continuum's right, most of which feed off Islamophobia.

The Illusion of Micropower

ISIS's murderous gang represents, above all, a few thousand individuals' phantasmagoric reaction to the feeling of being crushed and oppressed, shared by various categories of Muslims: Sunni Iraqis exasperated by the Iran-controlled Shia sectarian government that the Americans bequeathed to them; Sunni Syrians infuriated by the extreme barbarism of the Assad clan, backed by Tehran and Moscow; young Tunisians and others disappointed by the abortion of the Arab uprising, who see ISIS's barbarism as an outlet for their frustration and a means to escape a daily life of unemployment and misery; young French, British, and other Europeans "of Muslim migrant descent," enraged by their experiences of social precarity aggravated by Islamophobic racism deeply rooted in the colonial legacy; young migrants from Muslim-majority countries who confront the same racism, which becomes more virulent the less its targets are "assimilated." All of them resent the United States, as well as France, Britain, and the other Western countries involved in the wars waged in the lands of Islam, whether in the Middle East or in Africa.

In the face of this colossal adversity, a fringe element takes the plunge. Subject to bullying by the state's representatives and frustrated that they cannot participate in the society of overconsumption without resorting to theft and its associated risks, they hope to exchange their status as pariahs for the status of participants in an authoritarian regime that is all the more alluring because it is unbridled. (The other option they have for accessing a parcel of power is joining the police, whose actions are restricted in most states.) The illusion of micropower without limits fascinates even those who convert to Islam. The appeal of this turn to fundamentalism only grows for young males, thanks to the ideological legitimation it provides for uninhibited sexual domination, including the prospect of sexual enslavement, which ISIS dangles skillfully.

Others, looking for still more extreme adventures, succumb to the promise of achieving ecstasy by blowing themselves up. A fatal option that requires self-annihilation — and therefore unflinching determination — it attracts a far smaller number but enough to bring about spectacular massacres. Those who perform ISIS operations in Western countries have the same psychology as the one described in this book. The "ecstatic joy" of their murderous escape brings them an immediate satisfaction that adds to the prospect of an unlimited stay in paradise. This variant of Pascal's wager, shared by all those who go down the path of no return by joining one of the avatars of Islamic terrorism, carries more risk than the original: for these suicide bombers to swipe the stake not only

would God have to exist, but that God would have to approve of their organization's peculiar, minority interpretation of the Islamic religion. Otherwise, they would be better off if there were neither a hereafter nor a last judgment.

To believe that entering paradise is the primary motivation of fundamentalist terrorism's recruits, rather than a side bet, is to confuse them with mystics or "fools of God," which, in their overwhelming majority, they are not. It also attributes more importance to the religious rationality of their commitment than it really has.

The same applies to all doctrines that are irrational from the standpoint of the *longue durée's* humanistic ideology. The reasoned appeal of Adolf Hitler's grotesque anti-Enlightenment ideology would have been very limited without the cult of hatred and the fascination with violence that he carefully nurtured and staged under historic and social circumstances conducive to political reaction.

ISIS has understood this perfectly: as all observers have emphasized, it has brought totalitarian propaganda to a new degree of sophistication in its macabre staging as well as in its production and diffusion of images. The cult of hatred and the fascination with violence play key roles in Islamic terrorism's recruitment strategy, whether in Muslim or in Western countries.

And yet, hatred and violence do not develop as if by spontaneous generation: they need aggravating circumstances. When they support a weak-to-strong strategy — a strategy of the oppressed against the oppressor (or more accurately, of a member of the oppressed category against a member of the oppressor category) — their intensity matches the sense of humiliation and injustice that underlies them. At its origin, Al Qaeda's barbarism stemmed directly from the encounter between the barbarism of the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan and the obscurantist culture propagated by the Saudi kingdom and the Pakistani military dictatorship supported by the United States. The intense resentment created by the criminal embargo imposed on Iraq after the ravaging onslaught launched by the United States in 1991 fueled it, the American occupation of Iraq starting in 2003 further intensified it, and the extreme barbarism of the Syrian regime, backed by Iran and its auxiliaries, brought it to a climax.

Barbarism directly inspired by Al Qaeda and ISIS has raged in France in a spectacularly deadly way since January 2015. The relationship between this sad singularity and France's long and very brutal colonial history in Africa, followed by the social, political, and cultural consequences of decades of French exploitation of a cheap labor force that originates from the same continent, is as obvious as the relationship between these same facts and the 2005 suburban riots. In a fleeting moment of political lucidity, from which he quickly recovered, then-prime minister Manuel Valls himself recognized the link between the attacks in Paris and the conditions of the people originating from African immigration, which he rightly described as "an ethnic, social, and political apartheid."

This apartheid, aggravated by harassment from repressive apparatuses, constituted the ground on which ISIS and Al Qaeda successfully recruited volunteers. They had little difficulty convincing followers that France had declared war on "Islam" in light of the military adventures waged in Libya, Mali, Syria, and Yemen by François Hollande, who tried to offset his wimpy image by proving himself trigger happy. His remarkable readiness to shoot was narrowly linked to his achievements as a weapons dealer who presided over an impressive increase in French arms exports, a gunsmith willing to overlook the criminal records of his clients.

The New Reactionary Axis

It is still too early to take the full measure of the global landslide represented by Donald Trump's victory in the US election. Let us note, however, that, when this preface was written — more than one month before his inauguration — Trump had already largely disabused people of the belief that he would act in a “presidential” fashion once elected — a surprising hope considering that it was by behaving in the opposite manner that he managed to get elected in the first place (admittedly, by only a minority of voters). Some commentators emphasized that, in 1933, many thought Hitler's verbal delirium would give way to a more reasonable attitude after he donned the coat of chancellor of the Weimar Republic.

The German-Italian-Japanese axis that formed in the 1930s was counterbalanced by the states that would found the United Nations in 1942: the United States, the United Kingdom, and the Soviet Union. To be sure, the course of history is still far from being as tragic as World War II, but the prospects are quite worrying. This time, the reactionary axis in the making includes the United States and Russia, the two major military powers, while a strong rightist wind is blowing over Europe and Japan.

Fortunately, no third world war is looming on the horizon, but that is because the configuration of the global confrontation has changed. This shift is apparent in Trump's rants against Mexico, China, and downtrodden Muslims. The new reactionary axis seems disinclined to engage in a North-North clash or even in a “clash of civilizations,” in which religion would be the principal fault line, preferring war between North and South, between rich and poor. This will only escalate the clash of barbarisms that we have become familiar with since the turn of the century.

Over this somber horizon, a ray of hope nonetheless shines. The 2016 American election's most surprising element was not Donald Trump, whose rise continued the Republican slide toward the ultra-reactionary right, which began with Ronald Reagan and his “conservative revolution” — a designation first used by the political current that preceded Nazism in Weimar Germany — gained power during George W. Bush's presidency, found itself outflanked by the Tea Party insurgency, and reached its climax in the fierce and racist opposition to Barack Obama.

But nothing, on the other hand, had permitted us to imagine that a man who openly calls himself a socialist would excite millions of Americans, mostly young, and would only narrowly lose the Democratic primary against the party's establishment. Add to this the polls that gave this man, Bernie Sanders, a better chance of winning in a duel with Trump than his Democratic rival, Hillary Clinton.

This is because the radicalization provoked by neoliberalism's ravages does not occur exclusively on the Right. Indeed, it takes the shape of a polarization between right and left, as it did in the interwar years, albeit in a very different form today.

Several recent events bear witness to this: the Arab uprising of 2011, which, despite the formidable setback it has experienced since 2013, nevertheless revealed an enormous progressive potential, especially among young people, that continues to manifest itself intermittently, as in the social movement that started in Morocco in the fall of 2016; the surge of left-wing movements in southern Europe; and the remarkable ascension of Jeremy Corbyn, a man of the radical left riding a wave that swelled the UK Labour Party's ranks from two hundred thousand to half a million members. Even in France, where the political conditions seemed to predict a second-round presidential election pitting the hard right against the far right, 2016 saw a remarkable mobilization against the labor law enacted by the government of Manuel Valls, who, by aspiring to be the French Tony Blair, only managed to prepare the ground for an admirer of Margaret Thatcher: François Fillon.

The first edition of this book underlined the idea that “the struggle against neoliberal globalization — born in the last years of the dying twentieth century, and growing rapidly among the new generation on the verge of the twenty-first century — is our best hope for defeating the wave of reaction” fueled by the global crisis and our best hope for thwarting an upsurge in the clash of barbarisms that it forebodes. Fifteen years later, it is even clearer that the ongoing accumulation of catastrophes can only be interrupted by a change in the balance of social and political forces that could shift the socioeconomic paradigm at the global level and finally bring the ravages of neoliberalism to an end.

Gilbert Achcar

P.S.

* “Baghdad in France”. Jacobin. 06.20.2017:

<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2017/06/isis-terrorism-trump-xenophobia-iraq-war-syria>

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