

Dissidents of the International Left - Voices from Asia, the Middle East, North Africa...

Tuesday 18 June 2019, by [HEINTZ Andy](#) (Date first published: 10 May 2019).

The following is an interview with Andy Heintz on his upcoming book, *Dissidents of the International Left* [1], which features interviews with seventy-seven left-wing figures from around the world. The book highlights diverse voices from Asia, the Middle East, and North Africa, and was published in May 2019 by The New Internationalist.

Muftah: Why did you decide to write this book?

Andy Heintz: Three of my main objectives for writing *Dissidents of the International Left* were to promote universal solidarity, elicit “within-group” dialogue between left-wing figures, and to give activists and intellectuals who are not as well-known in the Western world the same platform as more well-known figures.

M: Who are some of the contributors and why were they chosen?

AH: Contributors include Jeffrey Sachs, Alex de Waal, Yassin al-Haj Saleh, Noam Chomsky, Ed Vulliamy, Gideon Levy, Glenn Greenwald, Mouin Rabbani, Amartya Sen, Meredith Tax, Marieme Helie Lucas, Pragna Patel, Malalai Joya, Alex de Waal, Farid Esack, Sokeel Park, Michael Walzer, Teesta Setalvad, Thea Riofrancos, Gina Vargas, Maria Teresa Blandon, Ana Cofino, Jieun Baek, Anabel Hernández, Stasa Zajovic, Bridget Conley, Anthony Appiah, Pervez Hoodbhoy, Yanar Mohammed, Diep Saeeda, Robin Yassin-Kassab, Peter Beinart, Bill Weinberg, and George Monbiot.

There were many reasons I chose to interview this group of people, but one of the main reasons is that I desired to involve people who really drilled down into issues instead of turning a complex topic into a five-second soundbite. I think there is a deep need (especially today) for information that plumbs the depths of multidimensional issues instead of just skimming the surface. For example, one of my aims in the book was to push back strongly against the longstanding, patronizing idea that North Korean citizens either monolithically support Kim Jong-un, or that those who do oppose him all oppose him for the same reasons. Contributors like Sokeel Park, Jieun Baek, and Lee Sang Yong really did an amazing job highlighting the agency, courage, humanity and heterogeneity of the North Korean dissident and defector community. The courage of North Korean defectors and dissidents should never be disappeared by non-stop coverage of talks between Donald Trump and Kim Jong-un. These two leaders are particularly awful examples of what happens when you spoil your children: They grow up to be mediocre, hypersensitive brutes that only know the language of power and cruelty. (It is frankly a tragedy that two grown children have so much power).

Another aim of mine was to interview and involve people who wrote about different aspects of the Syrian resistance, to avoid the Orientalist notion that all opposition to Bashar al-Assad has taken the form of violent Sunni extremism. I felt that narrative was lazy, heartless, woefully misinformed, and cruel to people who have spent the last several years opposing Assad. The local democratic councils, local coordination committees, and other self-organized communities that sprung up during the

initially peaceful protests to Assad's dictatorship—before violence forced protestors to arm themselves or give up their dreams of a democratic Syria—were inspiring and deserve to be remembered. Robin Yassin-Kassab and Yassin al-Haj Saleh are two of the most informed and genuine translators of the history of the Syrian revolution.

I also was inspired by the role women have played in the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria (also known as Rojava). While some Western reporting has been based on an exotic, Orientalist viewpoint solely restricted to the female fighters combating the Islamic State, who are indisputably heroic, others like Meredith Tax and Janet Biehl have highlighted the role women have played in the governance of the three cantons in northern Syria. I was very impressed to learn from them that all social institutions (hospitals, schools, and local councils) are co-presided over by men and women. Ethnic and religious pluralism coupled with a pushback against patriarchal violence also seems to have gained a substantial foothold in northern Syria. The role the YPJ (Women's Defense Forces) and YPG (People's Protection Units) played in helping the Yezidis escape from the terrors of the Islamic State (ISIS) was also notably heroic.

As an aside, I want to note that I have no right to give advice to either group. My hope, though, is that the ethnic and religious pluralism in Rojava is coupled with political choice, and that the grassroots democratic character of the local coordination committees in opposition held territories is complemented by broader gender equality. I also recognize that ultimately these are choices that must be made by Syrians, and that any criticism from people living relatively safe lives in the West or elsewhere must be respectful and informed by the country's social and political history.

M: What are the general themes and issues covered in the book?

AH: The general themes center around universal rights, building sustainable economies, supporting gender equality, offering cross-border solidarity with democratic left-wing movements, and confronting the complex and uncomfortable reality that, sometimes, the oppressed and the oppressor are the same people. For example, left-wing activists can oppose U.S. economic sanctions inside Iran as well as the decision of the Trump administration to pull out of the nuclear agreement with Iran, while simultaneously condemning the Iranian regime's hegemonic ambitions in a country like Syria and voicing support for the pro-democracy and pro-reform movements there.

M: How is this book relevant to the current political climate?

AH: I hope it offers a strong rebuke to sound-bite driven, low-attention span, empathy-free analysis—whether that analysis is done by far-right trolls operating hate-filled websites or by so-called geopolitical experts who advocate sending weapons to the despotic regimes in Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Israel, and elsewhere without the slightest hint of guilt about the people these weapons are likely to be used against. The former is likely to be accurately identified as a group of brainwashed, pitiful extremists, but the latter's ability to ignore human rights abuses for geo-strategic reasons is all too often admired.

M: Who will this book be of interest to and why?

AH: This book is for people who are yearning to hear about global citizens who still believe a better world is possible. It is also a book for those who are genuinely interested in local activists sharing an informed, first-hand perspective. For example, Stasa Zajovic, Predrag Kojovic, Sonja Licht, and Lino Veljak show how lazy generalizations about groups fighting each other for thousands of years is a shallow, intellectually lazy and ethically bankrupt way of looking at the Balkan Wars. On Mexico, Anabel Hernández exposes the systematic corruption that makes the war on drugs seem farcical to so many Mexicans.

The book is also for people curious about secular women of Muslim and Hindu descent whose insightful views are often missing from debates in the West. Pragna Patel, Gita Sahgal, Yanar Mohammed, Marieme Helie Lucas, Anissa Helie and others argue that by treating the Middle East as a region inhabited by a homogenized group of Muslims who embrace a culture that is immovably fixed in time, “civilizationalist” thinkers are providing extremists with a huge gift by ignoring the “within-group” disagreement among Muslims (and others) in the Middle East and elsewhere, including citizens in Muslim majority-countries who don’t practice any faith.

Finally, this book is for those who reject U.S. imperialism in Latin America while also remaining critical of the human and civil rights abuses of left-wing leaders who have refused to abandon the “extractivist” model of development championed by their political adversaries.

Above all, the book aims to shine a spotlight on local activists who are working to create a vibrant, democratic future in their respective countries. Far-right nationalism, religious extremism, anti-Islamic bigotry, rising anti-Semitism, anti-refugee and migrant sentiment and serious long-term environmental problems that can’t be confined to any borders can lead a person to embrace a fatalistic, cynical or apathetic view of the world. Although many of the people I interviewed in the book have seen the worst aspects of human nature, they still have managed not to succumb to any of these temptations. This takes a level of inner strength and discipline that I deeply admire.

P.S.

- Muftah, May 10th, 2019:
<https://muftah.org/dissidents-of-the-international-left/#.XQgVoi3pPox>

Footnotes

- [1] <https://newint.org/books/new-internationalist/dissidents-international-left>