Comment on “Popular Rebellion & Imperialist designs”

September 5, 2020

[Editors’ note: In 2011, during the first year of the Arab Spring, long-time dictators in Tunisia and Egypt were driven from office by mass popular protests. In Libya, however, Muammar Qaddafi determined to hold on to power at all costs and unleashed severe violence against demonstrators, threatening worse. In August 2011, scholar-activist Gilbert Achcar gave an interview to Tom Mills of New Left Project explaining his view that, while the left should not have *supported* the NATO intervention in Libya under any circumstances, it should not have opposed it either in its initial phase, when there was serious danger of an imminent massacre and no alternative means to prevent it. David Graeber posted a comment on the interview, which unfortunately became unavailable when the New Left Project website folded, but we reprint it here as a testament to Graeber’s political commitments and acumen. For further elaboration of Achcar’s view, see here.]

Comment on “Popular Rebellion & Imperialist designs,” by Gilbert Achcar

David Graeber

30 August 2011

This is a wonderful piece, and I want to thank the author first of all. I have so far stayed out of this debate because it tends to evoke such violent passions but also, because the terms of the argument seemed so skewed away from any politics I would recognize that I wasn’t sure my own position would make any sense to people. I look at this situation as an anarchist. So any question of “supporting” NATO is out of the question from the start. On the other hand, it was perfectly evident from the start that those people I would consider friends, comrades, and fellow spirits in Libya would, certainly, be on the rebel side. (Other people I couldn’t stand would also be on the rebel side, but that’s inevitable in a broad coalition organized against a widely hated dictator. How could it be otherwise?)

Arguing that no massacre would have taken place in Benghazi strikes me as the most extreme form

of special pleading. Under what other circumstances would people on the Left end up insisting that, even though a dictator is loudly declaring he intends to carry out a massacre, he wouldn't have really done it? This is the kind of argument you make only if you have already decided what you want to think and will say whatever it takes to justify it.

I think Michael Krog though really gave the game away in the following quote:

"I'm not actually a supporter of Gaddafi or his regime, I'm actually more concerned about the quality of our democracy and the integrity of our politicians. If they can repeatedly get away with launching illegal wars of aggression against weak, but resource rich states, based on lies and propaganda, the more transparently absurd the better, where are we going as a democracy/"

It is surely the case that politicians do launch illegal wars on the basis of lies, etc., but what Krog's quote implies is that (a) he believes that it is possible to have a US or UK which would presumably still be world powers, but would not be imperialistic, would obey principles of international legality, would not make false statements, etc. etc. In other words, he is from my perspective a state utopian. For me this is absurd. NATO is an imperial power and the idea that it would act as anything else is bizarre. How could it? We're dealing with Darth Vader here. It's unreformable. However, note also, (b) the post implies that his concern to see if he can't have hypothetical decent, freedom-loving, principled, socially-conscious people take over or at least have control over the apparatus of terror and violence that is the modern imperial state, and its extensions like NATO, is far more important to him than the fate of actual, real, concrete, non-hypothetical decent, freedom-loving, principled, socially-conscious people who happen to live in Libya. Since all such people are going to be inevitably on the side of the revolutionaries (again, not all revolutionaries would fit this description, but those people who do fit this description can be expected to have been with the revolutionaries). So what Krog is basically saying is that whether or not those (non-white, non-Western) concrete revolutionaries get raped, tortured, and murdered is really not his primary concern – the real issue for him is whether the apparatus of global violence is under the control of the right sort of (white, Western) politicians.

I imagine such people tell themselves their primary concern isn't with the white power structure but its ability to attack non-white people but I think examples like this are telling.

Me, since I think NATO is Darth Vader, the problem doesn't come up. If Darth Vader wants to intervene against some other mini-Darth to save a bunch of revolutionaries, how can one react but to say, "cool! that's pretty ironic but I'm really glad it happened." Does that mean I "support" Darth Vader? Of course not. He's an evil imperialist. Does that mean I'll be out protesting what he did just because I know his ultimate motives are bound to be insidious? No, of course not either, because first of all, protest implies I think Darth _could_ be acting in a more principled fashion, and second of all – and this is critical – I'm not a political party or government that has to have a "line" on every world issue anyway. But like the author of this piece, I will certainly step in to make my opinion known once Darth actively starts to try to subvert the revolutionaries, as he inevitably will.

I think the philosophical question is, when we see a conflict, who do we try to identify first? Do we try to identify who are the worst bad guys, and oppose them whatever they do? Or do we try to identify who are the closest to being the good guys, in the sense of, people who share our principles, values, dreams… and try to see how they assess the situation, and trust their instincts (since they're there, and we're not), and support them? I know that any anarchists in Libya right now are fighting on the revolutionary side (in fact I do know one Libyan anarchist, and he is), and I know they'd be happy Darth saved them from mass rape, torture, and killing, and if anything even more happy that they managed to outfox and outflank NATO's determination to avoid a genuine insurrectionary situation. Good on them!

From that perspective, the fact that some European and American leftists were happy to sacrifice them to a horrific fate – all the while insisting we can’t absolutely prove that fate would necessarily totally have happened – because what’s important to them is the dream of moving towards a kinder, gentler imperial center… well, it speaks to a very strange set of priorities.