

Between Barbarisms: The Arab Spring, Marx, and the Idea of Revolution

Greg Burris

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An assessment of the Arab Spring half a year later, in light of (1) the “clash of barbarisms” between the U.S. and Al Qaeda, (2) Marx’s concept of revolution, and (3) the possibilities for a revolutionary future – Editors

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With the collapse of the Soviet Union, the dominant Western paradigm for interpreting international conflict underwent something of a transformation. No longer seen as a death match between capitalist “freedom” and communist “slavery,” international conflict instead came to be understood by many as stemming from cultural differences. That is, the world was seen as being enveloped by a “clash of civilizations.” With the intellectual backing of influential academics in the West like Bernard Lewis and Samuel Huntington, this worldview has served as a new bunker mentality, especially in the wake of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001.¹ According to this view, the United States is not at war because of its policies. Rather, what is under siege is Western culture itself, the barbarians mercilessly pounding at the gates.²

From its outset, the notion of a clash of civilizations encountered critics on the Left—thinkers like Edward Said who dismissed it as nothing more than a foolish delusion, as “a gimmick like ‘The War of the Worlds.’”³ More recently, Gilbert Achcar turned this infamous thesis completely on its head, suggesting that what we have before us in the age of the global “War on Terror” is not a clash of civilizations, but rather a clash of *barbarisms*—the barbarism of the strong (the United States and its military, the transnational capitalist class, and the neoliberal agenda) versus the barbarism of the weak

¹ Bernard Lewis, “The Roots of Muslim Rage,” *Atlantic Monthly*, (September 1990), pp. 47-60; Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order*, (New York: Touchstone, 1996).

² For a broader discussion of how the clash of civilizations mentality has percolated into American culture and entertainment, see my article, “Barbarians at the Box Office: *300* and *Signs* as Huntingtonian Narratives,” *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, 28.2, (2011), pp. 101-119.

³ Edward W. Said, “The Clash of Ignorance,” *Nation*, (October 22, 2001), p. 13.

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(reactionary theocrats and fundamentalist terrorists).⁴ Thus, the world is not ensconced in a battle between primordially opposed civilizations, a kind of tribal feud gone global. Rather, a war is being waged between the oppressors in power and the underdog oppressors out of power, between the warmongers in Washington and their equally reactionary adversaries abroad. Meanwhile, the rest of humanity is held hostage, standing on the sidelines and serving only as innocent casualties as the deadly doppelgangers remained locked in their perpetual war of attrition. Obama and Osama, then, share more in common than a mere similarity in name. They represent mirror images of each other, two sides of the same atrocious coin—one symbolizing the barbarism of the strong and the other, though dead, symbolizing the barbarism of the weak. The major difference between them is just one of killing power. It is the difference suggested in Saint Augustine’s lesson of the pirate and the emperor; while the former simply molests the sea, the latter molests the whole world.⁵

But neither of these paradigms is sufficient to make sense of the Arab Spring. While one may still detect lingering traces of the old antagonism at play—i.e., the clash of barbarisms in Libya between NATO and the forces of the late Muammar Qaddafi—the Arab Spring is operating at an entirely different level. It is as if the “silent majority”—to borrow a rather clumsy phrase popularized by an even clumsier president—has come together in acts of sustained, collective rebellion throughout the region to oppose the twin barbarisms of our age. Thus, the Arab Spring came as a surprise not only to the dictators in power but also to the old guard—Islamist organizations like the Muslim Brotherhood. The protests that have swept across North Africa and the Middle East, from the Maghreb to Mesopotamia and beyond, are not the collective expression of the barbarian hordes venting their rage and fury against the symbols of civilized stability, law, and order. Rather, quite the opposite is true. The mass upheavals represent a kind of people’s spring cleaning, an attempt to oust the barbarians from their tyrannical seats of power—the Ben Alis and Mubaraks, the Qaddafis and Assads, the neoliberal dictators and totalitarian thugs. Thus, the barbarians are not at the gates; they are already in them.

But just how *revolutionary* are these protests? Indeed, can they even justifiably be described as *revolutions* at all? Karl Marx, writing in 1844, understood revolution to be a phenomenon which transformed all of society—not just a change of the person in power, but a radical transformation of a society in its entirety. As he put it, “Every revolution

⁴ Gilbert Achcar, *The Clash of Barbarisms: The Making of the New World Disorder*, updated and expanded edition, trans. Peter Drucker, (Boulder: Paradigm, 2006 [2002]).

⁵ Retold by Noam Chomsky in *Pirates and Emperors, Old and New: International Terrorism in the Real World*, new edition, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: South End, 2002 [1986]), p. vii.

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dissolves the *old order of society*; to that extent it is *social*. Every revolution brings down the *old ruling power*; to that extent it is *political*.”⁶ In other words, according to Marx, a revolution must have both social and political components.

An examination of the revolts of the Arab Spring indicates that thus far they still fall short of Marx’s standard. While in some cases dictators have been toppled, state power and the greater nexus of social relations have hardly been transformed at all. Thus, even the most promising revolts of the Arab Spring still occupy that nebulous gray zone existing somewhere between reform and revolution. This unsettled nature of the revolts is precisely what Asef Bayat was referring to when he suggested that we use the term “refo-lutions” to describe the Arab Spring—something more than mere reform but less than full revolution.⁷

The primary reason for this state of limbo can perhaps be found in the mixed intentions of the protesters themselves. It is ironic as it is unfortunate that one of the uprisings’ greatest attributes, their seemingly leaderless, almost anarchic nature, might just prove in the end to be their single most fatal flaw. While there is great unity in protest, even this unity may quickly dissolve as soon as the dust begins to settle. Bringing down a regime is no easy feat, but compared to the challenges of building a new society, it is child’s play.

While Western media portrayals of the events have typically concentrated on the question of democracy, it is clear that these protests did not merely represent calls for Western-style democratic rights. None of the protests can be understood properly without also taking into consideration the class element—that is, the widespread economic injustice that was experienced in both the neoliberal autocracies (i.e., Egypt and Tunisia) and the totalitarian fiefdoms (i.e., Libya and Syria). Nevertheless, a collective rebellion against kleptocratic injustice alone by no means indicates that we are about to witness the coming of a new, socialist dawn. The peoples’ uprisings have indeed had their fair share of working class resisters and socialist activists, but this description hardly applies to everyone who shouted slogans in the streets.

Bereft of a single, unifying vision for a future socialist society, it is quite probable that the people of North Africa and the Middle East who have lived so long under repression will have, at the very best, gained certain political rights, but at the price of remaining in

⁶ Karl Marx, “Critical Notes on the Article ‘The King of Prussia and Social Reform. By a Prussian,’” in Karl Marx, *Early Writings*, trans. Rodney Livingstone and Gregor Benton, (London: Penguin, 1992 [1975]), pp. 419-20. Emphasis in original.

⁷ Asef Bayat, “Paradoxes of Arab Refo-lutions,” *Jadaliyya*, (March 3, 2011), <http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/786/paradoxes-of-arab-refo-lutions>.

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subservient economic bondage. On this point, the example of South Africa casts a long, ominous shadow. There, the people who fought with all their mind, body, and soul to end *political* apartheid woke up the next day only to discover that their newly liberated limbs remained shackled by the heavy chains of *economic* apartheid. In South Africa, the long walk to freedom continues. A similar situation may very well come about as the result of the Arab Spring, and the protesters may eventually find that even though they put their lives on the line for revolution, all they got in the end was piecemeal reform.

While such a development is indeed lamentable, the winning of political rights should not be callously belittled as nothing more than a meaningless exercise in bourgeois theater. Simple reforms guaranteeing such things as new elections (Egypt) or the abolition of the secret police (Tunisia) are indeed real advances even if the larger issue of economic injustice is left unresolved. As Max Horkheimer once put it, “[T]here is no possible way of getting to know a penitentiary unless one is really locked up in it,”⁸ and it is entirely too easy for those living lives of relative comfort and luxury in the West to fail to understand just how miserable the conditions are on the ground in those places that do not have such “bourgeois” rights. As Leo Huberman, responding to the Soviet crushing of the Prague Spring, put it more than four decades ago,

They wanted freedom of speech and freedom of the press. What’s wrong with that? [...] [T]ry living for a while in a society where you are afraid to say what you think, or print what you believe, and you will be convinced very quickly that freedom of speech and freedom of the press are indeed precious and absolutely essential to a sane society.⁹

If the uprisings in the Arab world do not yet constitute a total social revolution, this does not mean that they are unimportant or that they represent nothing more than distractions from the class struggle. Not only does such a position reek of callousness and cold indifference towards the suffering of others, but it also runs counter to the historical claims of Marxist socialism. As V.I. Lenin acknowledged, “We are in favour of a democratic republic as the best form of the state for the proletariat under capitalism; but we have no right to forget that wage slavery is the lot of the people even in the most democratic bourgeois republic.”¹⁰ In other words, Lenin approved of reform on the condition that it was part of the larger revolutionary struggle. He was in favor of a democratic republic

⁸ Max Horkheimer, *Dawn & Decline: Notes 1926-1931 and 1950-1969*, trans. Michael Shaw (New York: Seabury, 1978), p. 31.

⁹ Leo Huberman, “The Invasion of Czechoslovakia: A Disaster,” *Monthly Review*, v. 20, n. 5, (1969), p. 2.

¹⁰ V.I. Lenin, *The State and Revolution*, trans. Robert Service, (London: Penguin, 1992 [1918]), p. 19.

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even though he knew this political form was not the one-stop, magic cure-all solution to all of the ills of capitalist injustice. Political reform was not an end in itself but rather a means to an end. This was precisely the position articulated by Rosa Luxemburg who famously argued that “there exists an indissoluble tie between social reforms and revolution. The struggle for reforms is its *means*; the social revolution, its *goal*.”¹¹

Even with these precedents, however, it is not entirely surprising that this debate is occurring within the Left over whether or not to support the not-quite-socialist, not-quite-reformist, and not-quite-revolutionary uprisings of the Arab Spring. Indeed, this debate has been waged before. During the American Civil War, Friedrich Engels voiced his frustration with the Unionists for failing to exhibit signs of class consciousness. “Where, amongst the people, is there any revolutionary energy?” he wrote in a letter to Marx. “If only there were some evidence, some indication, that the masses in the North were beginning to act as in France in 1792 and 1793, everything would be splendid.”¹²

Despite Engels’ disenchantment, however, Marx remained steadfast in his commitment to the North, recognizing that a Union victory would mean the end of American slavery. Marx harbored no illusions about the Union Army, and he understood that it represented no proletarian class. However, Marx hoped that with his support, he could encourage the radicalization of the North, thereby helping to bring out its concealed revolutionary potential. When Marx saw evidence of such radicalization, he was overjoyed. Thus, after receiving news of Abraham Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation, Marx was compelled to quote in Italian the legendary—and probably apocryphal—words that were defiantly muttered by a recalcitrant Galileo when he appeared before the Inquisition and was forced to renounce his discovery that the earth rotates around the sun: “*E pur si muove*”—and still it moves.¹³ That is, Marx greeted the news as a confirmation that his position was indeed the right one and that radical progress in the United States—including the end of primitive slavery—was possible.

Marx’s position of extending critical support to an imperfect party presents us with an example for how to approach the events of the Arab Spring. That the uprisings represent something less than an ideal socialist utopian revolution is without question. But to wait for the rise of the perfect proletarian class is to wait for something that will never come. It is to hang one’s hopes on a fairy tale, to behave no differently than those religious zealots

¹¹ Rosa Luxemburg, “Social Reform or Revolution,” in *The Rosa Luxemburg Reader*, eds. Peter Hudis and Kevin Anderson, (New York: Monthly Review, 2004), p. 129. Emphasis in original.

¹² Quoted in Kevin B. Anderson, *Marx at the Margins: On Nationalism, Ethnicity, and Non-Western Societies*, (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2010), pp. 98, 103.

¹³ Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 101.

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who pine away for the Second Coming of Christ. We are dealing here with real people and real problems, not abstract ideals and neat theoretical models. Revolutions—or even mere uprisings—are a messy business indeed. Thus, rather than waiting for a pure revolution that will never materialize, the correct position vis-à-vis the Arab Spring would be precisely the one adopted by Marx towards the Civil War. The less-than-perfect uprisings comprised of less-than-perfect rebels should be critically supported, and in so doing, those revolutionary elements within them should be encouraged to reach their full potential.

In his debate with Judith Butler and Ernesto Laclau, Slavoj Žižek suggested that, given a choice between class struggle and postmodernism, one should answer with a bold exclamation: “Yes, please!”¹⁴ In other words, Žižek rejects the binary logic and zero-sum mentality of the question and instead proposes an all-encompassing solution, a third way. He wants to have his cake and eat it, too. A similar choice presents itself with the Arab Spring. Do we meekly accept the reformist tendencies or do we insist on the development of a full-blown, class conscious, proletarian revolution? Given a choice between the two, we should do like Žižek and happily take both.

There is still a great risk that the Arab Spring will end badly. The chances of cooptation are great, and the street power that has taken the region by storm may very well lead to nothing more than the replacement of one dictator with another—only this time, perhaps one with less of a Mubarak-like grimace and more of a King Abdallah-like grin. Indeed, we can already discern certain trends that testify to the probability of this grim possibility being realized. When protesters surrounded the tanks of the Egyptian military with their bodies, the drivers emerged only to be greeted with cheers and handshakes. It was as if the protesters had managed to coopt the military, to bring them to their side or, at the very least, to neutralize them in the simmering conflict with the Mubarak regime. It is perhaps out of this atmosphere of optimistic idealism that some Egyptians did not think twice about temporarily handing the reins of power over to the military upon Mubarak’s forced ejection. Such hopes soon proved naïve, and the Egyptian military immediately began replicating some of the old repressive tactics of intimidation and control that the people had fought against, cracking down on workers’ strikes and administering intrusive virginity tests to detained female activists. Thus, the historic groundswell of protests in Egypt initially seemed to have only succeeded in removing the figurehead of oppression from power and not the oppressive system itself. Mubarak was gone, but the structures of repressive authority remained.

¹⁴ Slavoj Žižek, “Class Struggle or Postmodernism? Yes, please!” in Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau, and Slavoj Žižek, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left*, (New York: Verso, 2000), pp. 90-135.

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It is also possible and even probable that the mass upheavals will do nothing more than create the conditions for a complete capitalist takeover. Though the uprisings were clearly not a preplanned part of the neoliberal agenda, these revolts might yet function to further consolidate capitalism's stranglehold over the region. While the neoliberal remolding of Iraq came at an enormous domestic political price in the United States, the Libyan masses have already done much of the initial work themselves. All that was required to put the imperialists' foot in the door was just a little push by NATO forces. Here, one should resist the fiction so often peddled by Qaddafi's various defenders who claim that his regime represented a stalwart refuge of anti-capitalist politics; in point of fact, international conglomerates were already operative in Libya long before the revolution began. Thus, the chances of the resistance movement's actions merely paving a path for new oppressors—the transnational capitalist class and their multinational corporations—are great indeed. Hamid Dabashi, who nonetheless supported the toppling of Qaddafi, is thus completely justified in expressing his fear regarding Libya's future. "I [...] am far more scared of neoliberalism than I am scared of tribalism or Islamism."¹⁵

There is thus no guarantee that the optimism of the Arab Spring will not end in bitter failure, no certainty that the overthrowing of Ben Ali or Qaddafi will not eventually give rise to new Ben Alis and new Qaddafis. Just as in the ill-fated outcome of the 1979 Iranian Revolution, the barbarians could still win the day.

Despite these risks, the Arab Spring still has great potential. As much as many on both the Left and the Right may insist otherwise, history never unfolds the same way twice. Economic models and algorithms, whether formulated by Milton Friedman or by some old Soviet theoretician, are not the crystal balls they are made out to be. It is impossible to know how these events will turn out, and there is always that slight chance, that fleeting glimmer of hope, that these protests will give way to new, liberating possibilities, that the reforms won today will eventually lead to dramatic revolutionary changes in the distant future. In other words, these reforms could signify just the beginning of a far broader social transformation. One is reminded here of those reports of neighborhood patrols and roadblocks that were sporadically set up and erected in Cairo for protection and safety during the turbulent weeks in which Mubarak was still desperately clinging to power. Overnight, neighbors that had barely known each other became comrades. These bonds are still there, and their existence could help facilitate future coordinated actions.

¹⁵ Quoted in "NATO Tries to Control Libyan Revolution," *Real News Network*, (August 22, 2011), http://therealnews.com/t2/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=31&Itemid=74&jumival=7187.

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There is also the possibility that the zeal of the protests in one place could sow the seeds of revolution somewhere else. Indeed, the rebellious energy of the Arab Spring quickly spread throughout the region and even inspired events in some of the most unexpected of places—places like Israel and Madison, Wisconsin. Here, one should not overlook the ties between the Arab Spring and the Occupy Wall Street movement. The first issue of the so-called *Occupied Wall Street Journal* released by protesters in New York featured on its front page a story with the title “Learning from the World” which connected the dots between the Tunisian uprising against Ben Ali and the growing protest movement in the United States. Thus, even if an uprising in one country fails, it might inspire success elsewhere. One never knows when a street demonstration in the Middle East might spur on a protest even in the Middle West.

The Arab Spring has not yet run its full course. The embers of revolutionary fire that were first ignited by the desperate act of a desperate person in Tunisia have not yet burned out, even if the spring has changed into summer and even if the summer has given way to fall. As the Arab Spring continues, the Left would do well to watch, learn, and extend critical support. And with every advance made and every story of success, the Left should rejoice and recall those four words, “*e pur si muove.*”

Greg Burris is a former instructor at Istanbul Bilgi University in Turkey and a current graduate student in the Department of Film and Media Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara. This essay is based on remarks he delivered at a roundtable discussion held by the West Coast Marxist-Humanists in Los Angeles.