
Reviewed by Douglas H. Garrison

There is no shortage of books covering the Arab uprisings. A cottage industry devoted to the topic seems to exist within academic and trade publishers alike. This makes for both a wealth of information and perspectives to explore on one hand, but a considerable amount of hurried, half-baked, or overly ideological research on the other. Gilbert Achcar, Professor of Development Studies & International Relations at SOAS, offers a smattering of both in his latest book, *The People Want: A Radical Exploration of the Arab Uprising*. While Achcar provides a thorough, cogent, and challenging critique of the dominant narrative streams surrounding the so-called “Arab Spring,” he occasionally crosses the very fine line between fact-based Marxist critique and specious, ideologically motivated polemic.

What makes Achcar’s contribution unique and welcome among the current offerings in the genre is his treatment of structural inequality and political economy in the Arab world. Unlike many authors who pay brief, descriptivist lip service to the effects of structural inequality on Arab politics and society, Achcar goes to great lengths to dissect and analyze it. This analysis allows him to build a compelling case for placing socioeconomic structure at the root of the uprisings. He starts from the premise that social conditions throughout the Middle East and North Africa can be summed up in three words: “poverty, inequality, precarity,” all of which stem from the fact that, of the regions of the developing world, the Arab world is the one “facing the most severe developmental crisis.”

The first two chapters of *The People Want* address this crisis, providing a deep political economy of the Arab Middle East. Achcar focuses on developmental challenges to the region posed by structural constraints on employment and economic growth (poverty, inequality, demography, e.g.), and to the “peculiar modalities” of Arab capitalist economies, i.e. kleptocratic neoliberalism, patrimonialism, and rentierism. His analyses are as rich as they are scathing.

Discounting the Gulf oil monarchies as anomalous and problematic outliers (which he later addresses), Achcar shows how a toxic mixture of decreased state and public investment, decreased foreign direct investment, externally imposed neoliberal structural adjustment programs, and entrenched elite patrimonialism served to erode the socioeconomic foundations upon which Arab authoritarian regimes stood. Combined with rapid population growth (the highest in the developing world from 1970-90) and unsustainable unemployment rates, these structural “fetters” to economic development lead Achcar to the conclusion that the “revolutionary explosion” of 2010-2011 was a foregone conclusion by the early 2000s.

This otherwise thoughtful and provocative socioeconomic analysis loses its footing when Achcar delves into the regional and international political contexts surrounding the uprisings. The specter of imperialism looms large in these discussions and remains the major theme throughout the rest of the book. Achcar’s chief bogeymen are the United States, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia, and he ascribes levels of power and influence to each they could only dream of possessing. We are told, for example, that the US played a direct role in forcing Zine El Abidine Ben Ali out of power, although the “details” of this involvement “remain unclear.” These and other tropes of anti-imperialist rhetoric—reducing foreign policy to a simple matter of petroleum, e.g.—wend their way through Achcar’s narrative and ultimately prove distracting from the more interesting historical analyses he conducts. It is to Achcar’s credit, however, that he candidly rejects the discourse of those on the radical left who support the likes of Bashar al-Assad in the name of anti-imperialism.
The most problematic aspect of the book is Achcar’s treatment of Islamists. It says a great deal about the author’s ideological commitments when he describes Islamists as largely beholden to Gulf interests, ideologies, and funding while espousing “a reactionary ambition” to “roll back the wheel of history.” One aspect of this treatment can be found in the way Achcar formulates his conception of revolutionary agency.

We find an odd and disturbing inconsistency here, for Achcar devotes an entire chapter to detailing the “Actors and Parameters of the Revolution,” in which he illustrates how and why each grouping of actors (labor unions, liberal activists, et al) participated in making the uprisings. These groups are given revolutionary agency in the narrative. But, when he moves on to analyze “post-revolutionary” electoral processes, actors (notably Islamist political parties) exchange their agency for the whims of supposed financial “overlords” and puppet masters elsewhere. Structure, in the form of Gulf petrodollars and Western collusion, takes over at this point. Achcar’s description of Ennahda’s 2012 parliamentary victory, for example, expends more ink documenting the party’s Muslim Brotherhood and Gulf connection than it does examining the party’s platform, grassroots outreach strategy, or candidate lists.

Here, as with the theme of imperialist meddling, we find allusions to conspiracy. Where some might see well organized political parties winning elections on the bases of popular platforms and years of social activism at neighborhood and municipal levels, Achcar sees Al-Jazeera acting as a de facto mouthpiece for the Muslim Brotherhood, Qatari and Saudi money funding local Islamist-friendly media outlets (TV, radio, and online) and proselytizing efforts, and the US colluding with these efforts in order to maintain regional economic stability. More troubling than this line of argument, however, is Achcar’s adoption of the Arab Left’s “betrayal” discourse with regard to Islamists and the revolution. Achcar is sympathetic, albeit tepidly, to the position that Islamists in Egypt, Tunisia, and Libya opportunistically “co-opted” the revolutionary process and betrayed their co-revolutionists on the Left—a tired argument facts reject.

Although it launches into social and economic critique with great promise, The People Want takes a turn for the hyperbolic and conspiratorial. This should perhaps be expected, given its subtitle as a “radical” exploration. Nevertheless, the ideologically-steeped rhetoric can be difficult to digest from the point of scholarship that takes Islam—any religion, at that—seriously. Achcar should be praised for his work excavating and mapping the vast web of structural inequalities that lie at the heart of the Arab uprisings, but one cannot look past the assorted factual inconsistencies and ideological polemic that cloud the rest of the book.

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