

The Clash of Barbarisms: The Making of the New World Disorder

by Gilbert Achcar, Saqi Books, 2006, 192 pp.

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Gilbert Achcar is not widely known in Anglo-Saxon circles. His brand of political scholarship is very French and his brand of intellectual politics is also very much a product of the French left. As a leading light of one of the revolutionary Marxist groups in Parisian life (the *Ligue communiste révolutionnaire*), he has spent what many would dismiss as wasted hours debating the applications of anti-imperialist theory to Iraq's elections with sparring partners like Alex Callinicos. His American and British partners of choice are Noam Chomsky and Tariq Ali. His pet hates, Salman Rushdie and, inevitably, André Glucksmann. His background will not immediately endear him to Anglo-Saxon audiences.

This should not bar his book from due attention. The book has flaws, but they are not flaws of scholarship or political thought. Even Achcar's sustained critique of American foreign policy is, as he argues in his own defence against anti-Americanism, no more anti-American than the views of a large number of American citizens. Indeed, it is balanced in his case by an informed critique of contemporary Islam, and of al Qaeda in particular, which is an especially valuable aspect of the book. Here he is on firm ground. He knows his subject better than most. He has lived over half his life in the Middle East – in Lebanon – and his regular commentaries on Middle East affairs in *Le Monde Diplomatique* have earned him a specialist reputation in France. He is not exactly even-handed in his evaluation of the West and Islam, justifying his bias with the observation that the greater responsibility lies with the greater power, but he fairly and squarely calls down a plague on both the houses which ferment what he condemns as barbarism.

Achcar's starting point, in the wake of 9/11, is that Samuel Huntington's 1993 predictions were correct, except in Huntington's choice to characterise the clash as one of 'civilizations.' For Achcar, the clash is one of 'barbarisms' and his theme is finely worked out through this short and scholarly book. Its central argument is that what Huntington has done is 'to mistake something for a clash of civilizations that is quite evidently a clash of barbarisms.' Superficially this might have been an easy case to argue, but also unproductive, a mere catalogue of barbarous acts on

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both sides. However, this is not a superficial book. It is not primarily about drawing up a balance sheet. Though he overturns the fundamental thesis of *The Clash of Civilizations*, Achcar admires Huntington's scholarship – much more than that of Fukuyama, who receives short shrift for his ignorant coining of the term 'Islamofascism.' Achcar joins Huntington in his bleak vision of the 'global Dark Ages' now emerging from the sheer chaos of the post-Cold War period. In Achcar's analysis, it is the dark sides of both Western and Islamic civilizations – their respective barbarities – that are competing in this new Hobbesian world order. What these barbarisms spawn is a cycle of escalating violence, of mutual annihilation, a version of exterminism. Civilizations, he argues, here and elsewhere, would by definition be incapable of dealing with each other in this way.

Achcar has an alternative framework to propose – instead of Hobbes' state of fear, accompanied by hyper-armament and violent subjugation, there is a model of international relations based on Locke's 'political society,' achieved by freely consented association, the will of the majority, and international law. This is, after all, a model which is consistent with the process of 'civilization.' It was the world order model aspired to in the wave of international institution-building at the end of World War II. Achcar is not theorising in abstraction here. As a historian of international affairs, he clearly believes (and with good reason) that there was a historical moment for taking that path in the last decade of the twentieth century. There was a moment, given the collapse of the Cold War and the old Soviet Union, for a strengthening of the international institutions and a renewed commitment to cooperative security and development. His anger that the opportunity was missed is here directed unambiguously at Washington. 'This is the path Washington has chosen ...' he says of rising US military budgets, falling foreign aid, sidelining of the United Nations, and the number of major wars in which the United States has engaged since 1990. He contrasts the progressive institutionalism of the 1940s, driven by the Roosevelt administration, with the 'new world ordering' of Bush senior in 1990, informed by the strategic vision of the Project for an American Century, which dominates the present administration. This is virulent criticism of the American ruling class. It is also a surprisingly sober neoliberal stance for an old French Trotskyist.

In a more subtle critique, Achcar anatomises the failure of Islam to evolve a modern socio-political form and compares this with the failure of the West (and former Soviet bloc) to evolve a credible progressive alternative to neoliberal capitalism. This dual perspective leads to striking insights into how, in both cases, 'the combination

of these two dimensions – socio-economic anomie together with political and ideological anomie – has inevitably led people to fall back on other factors of social solidarity such as religion, family and fatherland.’ He remarks that ‘the resurgence of religious fundamentalism ... is only one of their many manifestations.’ And, while he systematically rejects ‘the culturalist postulate that Islam and democracy are inherently incompatible,’ Achcar underlines the urgent need for Islamic political reform. His conclusions are that, in both cases, a ‘credible progressive alternative’ needs to emerge to ‘pull the rug out from under reactionary identity politics, by channelling social discontent toward transformative action in the pursuit of democracy and justice.’ The excursus into Durkheim’s concept of ‘anomie’ allows Achcar to balance theoretically the dark side of neoliberal globalization and the dark side of the Islamic revival – the two barbarisms he sees as opposing each other. His own highly original sociological analyses of Islamic fundamentalism and the al Qaeda network, over many years, have also stood the test of time. A writerly quirk almost obscures this triumph – Achcar enjoys quoting long passages of his earlier work verbatim, in spite of the fact that he has made an ideological journey in those years, or at least abjured the use of jargon. In 1981 he defined the intellectual elite of Islamic fundamentalism (and its terrorism) as ‘a petty bourgeois and plebeian current.’ This is so quaintly phrased as to be opaque to most contemporary readers. But his later explanation that what he meant was that it is a modern middle-class phenomenon is spot on, and was a judgement ahead of its time.

Linked with this judgement is Achcar’s retelling of the history of Islamic fundamentalism. Supported by work of Malcolm Kerr (*The Arab Cold War*, 1970) and John Cooley (*Unholy Wars: Afghanistan, America and International Terrorism*, 1999), he takes us back to barely remembered days when Islamic fundamentalism seemed a natural ally of the West. In those days, reactionary Islam could be relied upon both as an adversary of populist nationalism and as a permanent bastion against the encroachments of soviet communism. Indeed, Islamic fundamentalism ‘won out only by default’ in many regions, that is, only after its competition was eliminated with help from outside. Western powers, in turn, could be relied upon to help repressive regimes stamp out alternative ‘left’ opposition wherever there were earlier stirrings of democratic aspiration in the Islamic world. This, we are reminded, accounts for the shock of the Iranian revolution in 1979. It came from the ‘unexpected ideological challenge’ of anti-Western radicalism and Islamic fundamentalism – an unanticipated fusion at the time.

Achcar’s historical account of the development of Saudi Arabia also commands

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authority. It tells how the political framework of the country has developed, in close collaboration with the United States, since before the Second World War. Saudi Arabia is now 'the world's largest oil exporter,' 'the world's largest arms importer,' and most of its 'enormous foreign assets are invested in the United States.' Achcar dubs it 'a sort of Islamic Texas.' He is in good company (with Zbigniew Brzezinski) in describing the US-Saudi relationship as one of established 'asymmetrical interdependence.' The connections between Saudi Arabia and al Qaeda – 'one of the maddened avatars of Islamic fundamentalism' – are an important part of the long-term picture here, not a recent surprise or an irruption out of the blue. The image of Frankenstein's monster – a favourite one in the region – is lovingly dealt with in this context, and the complex relations between al Qaeda and US foreign policy are expertly drawn in. A central section of the book deals with the political career of Osama bin Laden and the development of his personal 'duel with Washington.' Some parts of the story rely heavily on Gellman, Woodward, and *The Washington Post* – but it is well told, and Achcar is at his best in his original analyses of Osama's speeches. The material is meticulously brought together from Osama's videotaped interviews and Al Jazeera broadcasts. It is a classic demonstration of the Clausewitzian dynamic of 'going to extremes.' Achcar debunks myths on both sides, both about the successes of bin Laden and the al Qaeda network, and about their irrationality and hatred of Western 'values.'

The book's main shortcoming is an odd one by modern editorial standards. It was written and first published in 2002 and is now offered in an 'updated and augmented' version completed in late 2005. Yet, by the author's own admission, only one short chapter has been added to the three original chapters, and nothing in those three original chapters, or in the introduction and conclusion of the work, has been updated in any way. Given the nature of the subject, this is extraordinary. In the first place, the 'Postscript' chapter is little more than a list of illustrations of the 'clash of barbarisms' in the years from 2002 to 2005. There is some interesting detail, but a sense of incompleteness, which makes this the least successful section of the book.

In the second place, the new chapter does not deal in any way with either the London or the Madrid bombings. This is uncomfortable, and at the same time wastes an opportunity to set right an earlier error of classification, as it now appears. Achcar identifies in his text only *two* forms of terrorism – transnational mass terrorism, and terrorism carried out by groups against societies they emerge from. He is at

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pains to separate these two forms empirically and theoretically. The sociology of the London bombers is a disconcerting one in that respect, and it would have been illuminating to have Achcar's comments on this new hybrid form of transnational-home-grown terrorism.

In the third place, the failure to update leaves numerous sore thumbs sticking out of the original text, which a writer who wants to make a wide political impact would be wise to attend to. One I found unforgivable was Achcar's three-point 'programme' for preventing terrorism by tackling the fundamental causes of barbarities, not because I disagree with him, but because two out of his three points – withdrawing US troops from Saudi Arabia, ending the Iraq embargo, and resolving the Israeli-Palestine conflict – have been spectacularly overtaken by events since 2002!

This is a pity, because the book is not only well written, it has a gifted translator in Peter Drucker. The text is still Gallic in tone, philosophical, even poetic – the references to Racine and Malraux a joy to any moderate Francophile – but it is easy and comprehensible. I would like to see Achcar's fine scholarship embrace other Anglo-Saxon literatures – the deeply principled but ideologically free empiricism of the US's Michael Klare (*Blood and Oil*, 2004) or the UK's Paul Rogers (*Losing Control*, 2002), for example – which might lead to mutual benefits and recognition. In the meantime I concede that, as the author hopes himself, 'this little work ... sheds some useful light on a dark world.'

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