

CHAOS UNDER THE HEAVENS — THE SITUATION IS EXCELLENT

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In China, so they say, if you really hate someone, the curse to send his way is: ‘May you live in interesting times!’ Indeed, ‘interesting times’ tends to be periods of unrest, war and struggles for power in which millions of innocent people end up suffering the consequences. The ongoing events, which started in Tunis and have since exploded in Egypt, are signs that we are approaching a new epoch of interesting times. The usual accusation that Western powers are now paying the price for their hypocritical support of non-democratic regimes doesn’t quite reach far enough. Neither in Tunis nor in Egypt have we observed any strong Muslim fundamentalist presence — the people have simply revolted against an oppressive regime. The big ques-

tions are, of course ‘What will happen the day after?’ and ‘Who will emerge as the political winner?’

When a new provisional government was nominated in Tunis, those excluded were Islamists and the more radical Leftist factions. The reaction of smug liberals was ‘good - they are the basically same, two totalitarian extremes’. But are things really as simple as that? **Rather, does the true long-term antagonism exist precisely between the Islamists and the Left?** Even if they are momentarily united against the regime, once they approach victory, the unity between such divisive forces eventually splits and they tend to engage in a deadly fight, often more cruel than the one against their common enemy.

Let’s recall the last elections in Iran. The green colour adopted by the Mousavi supporters, the cries of ‘Allah akbar!’ that resonated from the roofs of Tehran in the evening darkness - these clearly indicated that they saw their activity as the repetition of the 1979 Khomeini revolution, as a return to its roots and the undoing of the revolution’s later corruption.

The 1979 Khomeini revolution cannot be reduced to a hard-line Islamist takeover — it was indeed much more. Now is the time to remember the incredible effervescence of the first year after the revolution, with the breath-taking explosion of political and social creativity, organisational experiments, and debates among both students and ordinary people. The very fact that this explosion had to be stifled demonstrates that the Khomeini revolution was an authentic political event, a momentary *opening* that unleashed unheard-of forces of

social transformation, a moment in which ‘everything seemed possible.’ What followed was a gradual closing through the take-over of political control by the Islamist establishment.

Even in the case of clearly fundamentalist movements, one should be careful not to miss the social component. The Taliban are regularly presented as a fundamentalist Islamist group enforcing its rule through terror — however, when, in the Spring of 2009, they took over the Swat valley in Pakistan, *The New York Times* reported that they engineered ‘a class revolt that exploits the profound fissures between a small group of wealthy landlords and their landless tenants’.

The ideological bias apparent in the *New York Times* article is nonetheless discernible in terms of how it speaks of the Taliban’s ‘ability to exploit class divisions,’ as if the ‘true’ agenda of the Taliban lies elsewhere — in religious fundamentalism — and they are merely ‘taking advantage’ of the plight of the poor landless farmers. In this regard, one should simply add two more things.

First, such a distinction between the ‘true’ agenda and instrumental manipulation is externally imposed onto the Taliban: as if the poor landless farmers themselves do not experience their plight in ‘fundamentalist religious’ terms! Second, if, by ‘taking advantage’ of the farmers’ plight, the Taliban are ‘raising alarm about the risks to Pakistan, which remains largely feudal’, what prevents liberal democrats in Pakistan, or in the USA for that matter, to similarly ‘take advantage’ of this plight and try to help the landless farmers?

The sad implication of the fact that this obvious question has not

been raised in the *New York Times* report is that the feudal forces in Pakistan are the 'natural ally' of the liberal democracy..

Reacting to the well-known characterisation of Marxism as 'the Islam of the 20th century', secularising Islam's abstract fanaticism, Jean-Pierre Taguieff wrote that **Islam is turning out to**

populist song full of complaints about how Washington is taxing hard working ordinary people to finance rich Wall Street financiers...

The short-circuit that occurred between the two programmes had an electrifying effect on me, with two especially noticeable features. First, there was the weird similari-

panied on its fringes by explicitly racist and neo-fascist groups). The exemplary case here is Poland: with the disappearance of the ex-Communists, the main parties are now the 'anti-ideological' centrist liberal party affiliated with the prime minister, Donald Tusk, and the conservative Christian party of the Kaczynski brothers. In Italy, Berlusconi is a proof that even this ultimate opposition is not insurmountable: his *Forza Italia* is both the party of global capitalism and of the populist anti-immigrant tendency. And there is Victor Urban, Hungary's new leader, not a Berlusconi with Hungarian values? **Today, the only way to mobilise the electorate seems to be stirring up fear (of immigrants and of one's neighbour).**

This brings us to the true ominous lesson learned from the Tunis and Egypt revolts: if moderate liberal forces will continue to ignore the radical Left, they will generate an insurmountable fundamentalist vagueness. In order for the key liberal legacy to survive, liberals need the fraternal help of the radical Left.

So, let's return to Egypt. The most shameful and dangerously-opportunistic reaction was that of Tony Blair, as reported on CNN. He indicated that change is necessary, but that it should be a stable change. 'Stable change' in Egypt today can mean only a compromise with the Mubarak forces, which may end up sacrificing Mubarak himself and slightly enlarging its ruling circle. The hypocrisy of the Western liberals is breathtaking: they publicly supported democracy, and now, when the people revolted against the tyrants on behalf of freedom and justice, not on behalf of religion, they are all 'deeply concerned'... Why concern, why not joy that freedom is given a chance? **Today, more than ever, Mao Ze Dong's old motto is pertinent: 'There is chaos under the heavens - the situation is excellent.'** ■

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be 'the Marxism of the 21st century', prolonging its violent anti-capitalism following the decline of Communism. Do, however, recent vicissitudes of Muslim fundamentalism not confirm Walter Benjamin's old insight that 'every rise of Fascism bears witness to a failed revolution'? The rise of Fascism is the Left's failure, but simultaneously it is evidence that there was a revolutionary potential and sense of dissatisfaction, which the Left was not able to mobilise. And does the same not hold true for today's so-called 'Islamofascism'?

Is the rise of radical Islamism not exactly correlative to the disappearance of the secular Left in Muslim countries? When Afghanistan is portrayed as the utmost Islamic fundamentalist country, who still remembers that, just 40 years ago, it was a country with a strong secular tradition up to a powerful Communist party, which took power there independently of the Soviet Union? Where did this secular tradition disappear to?

In the middle of April 2009, I was sitting in a hotel room in Syracuse, jumping between two different TV channels: one was showing a documentary on Pete Seeger, the great American country-singer with Leftist tendencies, and the other was a Fox News report on the anti-tax 'tea party' in Austin, Texas, with a country singer performing an anti-Obama

ty between the two singers, both formulating an anti-establishment populist complaint against the exploitative rich and their state, calling for radical measures, up to civil disobedience — a painful reminder that, **with regard to the form or organisation, today's radical-populist Right strangely recalls the old radical-populist Left.** Are today's Christian survivalist-fundamentalist groups with their half-illegal status, which see the main threat to their freedom in the oppressive state apparatus, not also organised like Black Panthers were back in the 1960s?

The situation is getting even worse in Europe. **In both Western and Eastern Europe, there are signs of a long-term reorganisation of the political space.** Until recently, that space was, in general, dominated by two main parties: a Right-of-centre party (i.e. Christian-Democratic, liberal-conservative, People's Party, etc.) and a Left-of-centre party (i.e. socialist, social-democratic, etc.), supplemented by smaller parties that address a narrower electorate (i.e. ecologists, liberals, etc.).

What is now progressively emerging is a space occupied by, on the one hand, a party that stands for global capitalism as such (usually with a degree of tolerance towards abortion, gay rights, religious and ethnic minorities, etc.), and, on the other, an increasingly strong anti-immigrant populist party (accom-

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