

Cartoons and Freedom of Speech

Interview with Carlos Latuff

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The hero of “freedom of speech”, boycotted by the corporate, mainstream media that are irresistible against the astringent truth: this is the most precise and accurate introduction which I can present about Carlos Latuff. Born in the suburbs of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, he is an artist of conscience whose artistic commitment and morality prevented him from becoming the pawn of imperialism. Carlos Latuff is a world-renowned cartoonist who has long brought into existence artistic works and cartoons in which the footsteps of creativity, novelty, intelligence and decency can be traced noticeably. He has never been given the opportunity to showcase his matchless cartoons in the New York Times, Guardian, Washington Post, BBC or CNN; however, the narrow hallways of personal blogs and independent media outlets which allowed his cartoons to breathe in the atmosphere of publicity, made him a man of genuineness and reality, known by those who seek something beyond the outdated, obsolete propaganda of “all options are on the table”.

Carlos Latuff has drawn numerous cartoons which depict the pains of oppressed nations around the world; from the Palestinians being suffocated under the Israeli occupation to the Iranians receiving the spates of psychological operation co-manufactured by the White House and Tel Aviv.

Here is the complete text of my interview with Carlos Latuff, conducted for Iran’s best-selling newspaper Jame-Jam, where we elaborately discussed his intellectual mission and the prospect of his artistic trajectory.

Kourosh Ziabari: Dear Carlos; it seems that you’ve dedicated your entire mission to independent, freelance journalism and one can clearly figure out that you are not usually paid in lieu of what you draw for the magazines, newspapers and websites since a complete set of your cartoons and caricatures are available on your website for free. Do you accede to draw cartoons which are contrary to your ideological mindset should you be offered remarkable, irresistible payments?

Carlos Latuff: No way! I will only make artworks according my own Leftist beliefs. I don’t trade ideology for money. I work for Leftist trade union (workers) press since 1990, that’s what I make for living. Mainstream media would never pay me for making anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist artworks. But I have what I call of “artistic activism”, producing cartoons and making them available on the Web for free of charge reproduction; cartoons with a different point of view from the Western mainstream media; cartoons exposing what Michael Moore would call of “the awful truth”. I already refused payments for my drawings about Palestine. Solidarity can’t be measured by dollars.

KZ: You've received serious death threats from the Zionist circles and Israeli groups a number of times. Would you please explain for us a little about the details of these threats and the consequential events that followed them? Have you ever thought of putting aside your professional and artistic mission in order to preserve your safe, tranquil life?

CL: In 2006 a website associated to Likud (Likudnik) published a long article about me, my art, my support to Palestinians and labeled me as an agent at the service of a supposed "Iranian propaganda machine", comparing me with Nazi propagandists. The author of the article argued why Israel didn't take care of me before and urged readers to take steps against me. Let me be straight, I really don't care about threats. Along the Palestinian cause I also support human rights organizations against police brutality in Brazil. This kind of activism alone could put me in high risk of life. But, as I said, I don't care; I will continue with my artistic support, 'cause if Zionists worldwide are pissed off about my cartoons, it's because I'm doing something right. Death can stop me yes, but not my cartoons. That's why I make them run free around the world through Internet.

KZ: You belong to a prosperous country which is the 8th economic power of the world and the 10th trade partner of the United States. Brazil also maintains normal ties with Israel and this is something which many anti-war and anti-imperialism activists dislike. Coming from such a country, you profoundly grasped the essence of oppressed nations' suffering and sympathized with them wholeheartedly. How did you rise from Brazil and came to assist the oppressed nations?

CL: I grown up in the suburbs of Rio and my parents worked hard to give me study and a humble but decent life. Being the 8th economic power makes no difference to the ordinary people in Brazil. We have poverty, corruption, criminal and police violence, affluent and strong landowners in countryside, people dying of dengue fever and malaria, and a mainstream media which is always trying to convince public opinion that everything is ok with capitalism. As someone living in a Third World country I can't turn a blind eye to this situation here and in other parts of the world. Last year I was in Palestinian refugee camps in Jordan and Lebanon, places very similar to Brazilian slums (favelas). It wasn't hard to realize that the language of poverty is universal, as universal must be the solidarity with people in need.

KZ: You've for years cooperated with a number of media outlets in the Western countries and can precisely estimate the veracity of the slogan of "freedom of expression" in the countries who introduce themselves as the harbingers of liberty and tolerance. I clearly remember the spates of verbal and political attacks on the artists who had participated in Iran's International Holocaust Cartoon Competition. Even the then United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan had condemned the contest and this could simply demonstrate the lopsidedness of "freedom" which they claim to be the pioneers thereof. What's your idea about that? Are the western media outlets really free?

CL: Still today I've been accused of denying Holocaust because of that artwork for which I won the second place in the Iranian cartoon contest. It's funny since the cartoon shows a Palestinian elderly wearing a concentration camp uniform, which not only affirms the existence of the Nazi Holocaust as well as making a comparison between it and the suffering of the Palestinians. I believe that this contest had exposed the Western's double standard.

When you ridicule and attack Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), Islam or Muslims, then this is called “satire”, “humor”, “freedom of speech”, whatever. Joking about Islam is pretty acceptable. Islamophobia is popular in the US and Europe, specially after September 11. However the same freedom you have for making cartoons about Islam and its Prophet you won’t have while dealing with Holocaust and Israel. If you dare draw Israeli soldiers killing Palestinians (isn’t a fact?), you will be automatically labeled as anti-Semitic. While Muhammad cartoons were wide spread in Europe, Holocaust cartoons weren’t not reproduced in any European newspaper.

KZ: Your stance towards Iran’s nuclear program (Iran intends to meet its energy, electricity needs through nuclear reactors) and Israel’s nuclear program (Israel possess up to 200 nuclear warheads, according to the Federation of American Scientists) is delicately accurate and specific, indicating your extensive acquaintance with the regional equations and developments. Iran is being lethally pressured to halt its civilian nuclear program and Israel has been unconditionally safeguarded by Washington to keep up with its military atomic program. What’s your take on this?

CL: In fact all this turmoil about Iranian nuclear program has more to do with the fear of US, Europe and Israel of having a country in Middle East with nuclear capability. It will change the geopolitics in the region, since no Arab country was ever allowed by US of having anything nuclear. Only Israel can have not only nuclear plants but also nukes, immune to inspections and international law. If Iran will develop nuclear capabilities for civilian or military use, it doesn’t matter. The point is, if US, Europe and Israel are so concerned about threats to peace, why don’t they start proposing sanctions against Pakistan and India, since both countries have a nuclear arms race since long time? Because both countries are allies of Washington? Why not a single word about the Israeli nuclear program? Why Mordecai Vanunu is prevented to speak about it?

KZ: Most of your critics accuse you of arising anti-Semitic sentiments by drawing cartoons which condemn the State of Israel and its leaders for the atrocities and felonies they commit. Is this the case that you’re opposed to Jews as the followers of a divine religion, or do you simply go up against the expansionist Zionists who commit crimes against humanity and massacre the defenseless people of Palestine?

CL: I’m not a religious man, and none of my cartoons deal with Judaism. You won’t find any of my artworks attacking the Jewish. My issue with Israel and their supporters is only about politics, imperialism. Even not being Muslim, I do support Muslims against Islamophobia, since I can’t agree with prejudice against religion. Of course anything that may be slightly perceived as criticism towards Israel will be associated with hatred towards Jews. This old trick is applied to anyone who dares speak against Israeli apartheid. But everyday more activists understand this misuse of anti-Semitism and keep the struggle regardless of the false allegations and smear campaigns from Zionists.

KZ: Have the global mainstream media outlets (the New York Times, Washington Post, Guardian, Los Angeles Times, BBC, Reuters, Associated Press and so forth) which universally rule the public opinions ever published your cartoons? Why don’t such media outlets which assert to be the pioneers of freedom of expression accept allowing the publication of disparate viewpoints which are contrary to their focal approach?

CL: Reuters made a video interview with me last year about my art and views. I had some of my cartoons shown on Al Jazeera and George Galloway show at Press TV, but this is an

exception. Usually only Arab media outlets are interested in my opinions. Western mainstream media isn't interested in giving space to a Leftist artist who supports people's struggle in Palestine, Iraq and elsewhere. But in a way or another, I find a place to make my opinions visible. Internet is my best ally. You see, even not being a famous artist promoted by mainstream media, you and your newspaper know about me and my cartoons. Internet has broken the obstacles imposed by corporate media. And I won't make concessions for mere 15 minutes of fame; will keep fidelity with my principles.

KZ: The subjugated people of Palestine and other countries which have been subject to the brutality of imperialism throughout the history will be encouraged and hopeful when they find conscientious artists like you sympathizing with them. Have you ever felt the courage and valor you present to the people of Palestine with your artistic endeavors?

CL: I'm very suspicious for talking about the Palestinians. I have never seen such a brave and courageous people like them. I started making cartoons about Palestinians since my trip to West Bank in 1999 and since then my sympathy for their cause only grow up. After my recent visit to Jordan and Lebanon, invited by Al Hannouneh Society for Popular Culture, I realized that my relation with Palestinians is not only political. I have pure love for that people.

KZ: Please tell us about your latest activities. How was the experience of winning a prize in the Iran-based International Holocaust Cartoon Competition? Do you like to come to Iran once again and touch the pains and difficulties of the Iranian people in person?

CL: Usually I don't participate in contests, since I'm not interested in the prizes and stuff. The purpose of my art is supporting social movements, rather than feeding my own ego. But I saw the Holocaust cartoon competition as a timely opportunity for making visual comment about Palestinian suffering. In that occasion, I was invited by my good friend Massoud Tabatabai to attend the prize award ceremony in Teheran but unfortunately I wasn't able to travel. But of course if I had another chance, I would be more than glad to visit Iran.

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