

“Progressives” Who Support the War: Gilbert Achcar’s Defense of Humanitarian Intervention

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Global Research, April 09, 2011

[ZNet](#) 9 April 2011

Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#)

Theme: [US NATO War Agenda](#)

Gilbert Achcar defends the recently “UN-authorized” imperialist intervention in Libya on the ground that general principles may require exceptions in concrete cases. “Every general rule admits of exceptions. This includes the general rule that UN-authorized military interventions by imperialist powers are purely reactionary ones, and can never achieve a humanitarian or positive purpose.”[1] This kind of argument brings to mind analogous special case positions in defense of torture (of the prisoner who may have information on the ticking bomb); and it reminds me of the claim of a set of defenders of the military attack on Yugoslavia that this was “illegal but legitimate.” His ultimate position, of defending the attack on Libya, but urging constructive criticism, calls to mind Randolph Bourne’s remark on the war-supportive intellectuals of World War I: “If we responsibly approve, we then retain our power for guiding. We will be listened to as responsible thinkers, while those who obstructed the coming of war have committed intellectual suicide and shall be cast into outer darkness.”[2] This was, of course, nonsense, and the responsible liberal thinkers of that bloody era merely contributed to justifying war, but such accommodationist thinking arises naturally in a militaristic environment, and in each such phase of history it returns to splinter war critics and lend support to the killing enterprise.

But before examining Achcar’s principles and factual claims justifying this new Western military attack on a relatively defenseless small country, I want to point out that his main and reiterated specific illustration of a historical case where imperial intervention would clearly have been warranted—Rwanda—is larded with factual errors and misunderstandings. He says that: “Just for the sake of argument: if we could turn back the wheel of history and go back to the period immediately preceding the Rwandan genocide, would we oppose an UN-authorized Western-led military intervention deployed in order to prevent it? Of course, many would say that the intervention by imperialist/foreign forces risks making a lot of victims. But can anyone in their right mind believe that Western powers would have massacred between half a million and a million human beings in 100 days?”

Achcar clearly swallows the standard narrative on the Rwanda “genocide,” in which the imperialist powers just “stood by”—he is explicit later that the Western powers “were not intervening” in the period before and while the Hutus supposedly massacred between 500,000 and a million Tutsis (and “moderate” Hutus). But in fact the Western powers *didn’t* just stand by; they actively intervened throughout, but not to contain the killing: Paul Kagame, the primary actor before, during and after the mass killings, was trained at Ft. Leavenworth; his Rwanda Patriotic Front’s 1990 invasion of Rwanda from Uganda was not punished by the Security Council; his subsequent infiltration and subversion of Rwanda was actively supported by the United States, U.K., Belgium, Canada and therefore the UN; his forces shot down the plane carrying Rwanda president Juvenal Habyarimana back to

Kigali on April 6, 1994, generally acknowledged to have been the “triggering event” in the mass killings; and Kagame’s well-prepared military forces were in action within an hour or two of the shoot-down.

Kagame needed this triggering event and the 100-day military conquest because, with his Tutsi comprising well under 15% of the population and vast numbers of Hutus having been made refugees by Kagame’s invasions and ethnic cleansings (and those by Tutsi military forces in neighboring Burundi after the Tutsi assassination of their Hutu leader), he would have been crushed in the free election to be held in 1995 under the terms of the 1993 Arusha Accords. And Kagame did a major part of the killing, extended into a slaughter of several millions in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) following his takeover of Rwanda. An internal State Department document of September 1994 indicated that in Rwanda itself Kagame’s forces had been killing some 10,000 Hutu civilians per month.[3] That information led to no responsive action from the United States, which had actually voted for a reduction in UN forces in Rwanda as the killings were escalating. This was consistent with the U.S. support of Kagame, his military conquest, and his subsequent invasions of and mass killings in the DRC.[4]

When in 1997 investigator Michael Hourigan reported to his employer, the International Criminal Tribunal on Rwanda, and its prosecutor Louise Arbour, that Kagame’s forces had been responsible for the “triggering event,” after consultation with U.S. officials Arbour quashed the investigation and the ICTR has never taken it up since. This important development, which tells us so much about the source of the violence, and the roles of the United States and the ICTR in underwriting, sustaining and protecting that violence, has rarely if ever been mentioned in the U.S. mainstream media, and clearly has escaped Gilbert Achcar’s notice as well.

So Achcar misreads history in suggesting that Western intervention was missing in Rwanda and that if the imperial powers had intervened they might have prevented 500,000-1 million casualties. The imperial powers *were* there and contributed positively to those deaths. Of course, they might conceivably have behaved differently, but what an illustration, which assumes behavior exactly the reverse of the (unrecognized and real-politic-based) reality! Achcar also fails to mention that in Iraq the U.S.-U.K.-UN combo killed 500,000+ during the “sanctions of mass destruction” era and were responsible for maybe a million more in the invasion-occupation. Can “anyone in their right minds” deny the Western capacity to impose or support mass deaths?

In making his case for Western intervention, Achcar mentions that there are thousands (1-10,000) possibly already killed in the Gadaffi advances, a rather wide range of possibilities. The 10,000 number he sources to the International Criminal Court, a name he provides perhaps to suggest authenticity. I wonder if he knows that all 14 indictees of the ICC are black Africans, but do not include Kagame or Museveni (Uganda), U.S. clients? Achcar’s pro-intervention policy stance here rests heavily on a threatened Gadaffi bloodbath, that “Western governments and everybody else” anticipate. This is a classic imperialist response that goes hand-in-hand with demonization and frequently inflated claims of target villain violence. Gadaffi, like Saddam Hussein in the 1980s, has moved quickly from a quasi-friend and ally to “another Hitler.” One of the durable justifications for the Vietnam war was the likelihood of a bloodbath by the evil forces of communism if the United States were to exit without victory, although the real bloodbath (maybe 3 million civilians) was inflicted by the United States. The demonization and bloodbath threat claim

did, however, help sustain the real bloodbath, with the help of the mainstream media. So Western military force is unleashed once again to prevent a bloodbath—to protect civilians!

Achcar describes the rebel forces fighting Gadaffi as representing a “popular movement” and “mass insurrection.” This is dubious—as Stratfor points out, the base of the insurrection has “consisted of a cluster of tribes and personalities,” the heart of which was in the East,, and whose members and leaders “do not all advocate Western-style democracy. Rather, they saw an opportunity to take greater power, and they tried to seize it.”[5] Achcar fails to mention that this eastern Libya base area was a principal recruiting ground for Al Qaeda, and that the killings of civilians and prisoners by these rebels has reportedly been large.[6] He does not suggest the possibility of a bloodbath if they were to take over Tripoli and western Libya.

While focusing heavily on the “nature of Gadaffi’s regime,” Achcar doesn’t discuss the nature of the imperial West’s regimes, their now systematic power projection by force, and their treatment of civilians in countries they attack. He doesn’t ask how their concern for Libyan civilians can be genuine when simultaneously they support the crackdown on Bahraini civilians and the invasion of Bahrain by Saudi Arabia. Assuredly he doesn’t refer to Madeleine Albright’s 1996 statement that the U.S. policy-caused death of 500,000 Iraqi children was “worth it” as indicative of U.S. concern over foreign civilian well-being. Or the significance of the almost daily reports of civilians killed in Afghanistan and Pakistan by U.S. drone attacks, and the many thousands of “collateral damage” deaths in these countries and Iraq. Weapons evolution with drones and cluster bombs has tended to enlarge civilian casualties.[7] Shouldn’t this be mentioned in evaluating claims that a military response featuring air-power will serve to protect civilians?

A relevant political fact, also, is that it is own-casualties that are sensitive matters at home, not foreign civilian casualties, especially where the mainstream media can be counted on to cooperate in keeping information (and indignation) on those distant civilian casualties at a low key. This means that once the bars are down and the airpower is unleashed in the interest of real objectives, like regime change, distant civilians may die in large numbers without the home public knowing the reality. The public can be managed by official handouts and suppressions, with media cooperation.

Remarkably, Achcar tells us that one legitimate reason for the West’s military response in defense of Libyan civilians is public pressure that builds as the public watches TV and demands action (“it is nonsensical, and an instance of very crude ‘materialism’, to dismiss as irrelevant the weight of public opinion on Western governments,” etc.). He never questions the morality of international military action based on a public opinion that is regularly managed by a war-prone elite. This was the case in the United States in the lead-up to the 2003 attack on Iraq, where propaganda lies and a cooperative media built up substantial public support for a war of aggression. With minor exceptions the left at that time did not think that that made an adequate case for attacking Iraq. Recent public opinion polls in both the United States and Britain show substantial majorities against warring with Libya,[8] so Achcar is mistaken that public opinion is driving the war policy, and he and other responsible left intellectuals are more closely aligned with the war-prone elite than the general public.

Perhaps most amazing is Achcar’s acceptance of the imperial powers as the “good cops” who can properly bring law and order through violence to the citizens needing protection. Is it reasonable to give the power to straighten things out by force to imperialist powers that

have been most guilty of using force in violation of both law and moral principles? The United States is daily killing civilians in Afghanistan and Pakistan, among other places, has an ongoing torture gulag, and has engaged in a steady stream of wars in violation of the UN Charter. It is the bedrock of support for Israeli aggressions and ethnic cleansings. Shouldn't that rule out approving it as an instrument of supposed justice in protecting Libyan civilians? Then there is the closely related rule of universality needed for meaningful justice. Can we support a U.S. initiated attack on another small country on alleged humanitarian grounds when such an attack is so extremely selective, so well geared to U.S. interests and priorities, and cannot be leveled against a U.S. friend or client or the United States itself, no matter how egregious the abuses?

Achcar performs one of the great somersaults in the collapsing left record in simultaneously supporting and opposing Security Council Resolution 1973. He says that it is not well drawn and should be refined:

The resolution leaves too much room for interpretation, and could be used to push forward an imperialist agenda going beyond protection into meddling into Libya's political future. It could not be supported, but must be criticized for its ambiguities. But neither could it be opposed, in the sense of opposing the no-fly zone and giving the impression that one doesn't care about the civilians and the uprising. We could only express our strong reservations.

So if it cannot be opposed except for details, the left must support it, but it should work hard to keep military actions within proper bounds:

Once intervention started, the role of anti-imperialist forces should have consisted in monitoring it closely, and condemning all actions hitting at civilians where measures to avoid such killings have not been observed, as well as all actions by the coalition that are devoid of a civilian protection rationale.

This defines a position for what we may call the "imperialism fine-tuning left," that will help show that the left as well as the leaders of imperialism really care for civilians.

What makes this stance exceedingly foolish as well as distinctly non-left is the idea that the "left" would be able to seriously influence policy once a war is embarked upon (and with "left" encouragement). This simultaneous approval and disapproval of the war will further splinter the left and carry it beyond mere marginalization to butt of jokes.

Achcar tells us that this intervention to protect civilians in Libya will prove "embarrassing" to the imperial powers, as the next time Israel bombs Gaza or Lebanon the world will demand a no-fly zone and picket for the same, and Achcar himself "definitely" will join the picket line. But why wasn't there a demand for a no-fly zone with Israel's invasion of Lebanon in 2006 and attack on Gaza? And why isn't Achcar picketing today against the killing of Bahraini civilians with the aid of a Saudi invasion force and the drone attacks on Afghanistan and Pakistan that take a heavy civilian toll right now? Perhaps he is too busy worrying about civilians in the latest U.S.-targeted state.

Notes-

[1] Gilbert Achcar, ["A legitimate and necessary debate from an anti-imperialist](#)

[perspective,](#)" ZNet, March 25, 2011. All further quotes attributed to Achcar derive from this particular essay.

[2] Randolph Bourne, ["The War and the Intellectuals,"](#) 1917. (Or see Randolph S. Bourne, *War and the Intellectuals: Collected Essays, 1915-1919*, Carl Resek, Ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1999), p. 13.)

[3] See George E. Moose, ["Human Rights Abuses in Rwanda,"](#) Information Memorandum to The Secretary, U.S. Department of State, September, 1994.

[4] For more details, see Robin Philpot, [Rwanda 1994: Colonialism Dies Hard](#), E-Text as posted to the Taylor Report Website, 2004; Christian Davenport and Allan C. Stam, ["What Really Happened in Rwanda?"](#) *Miller-McCune*, October 6, 2009; Edward S. Herman and David Peterson, ["Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of Congo in the Propaganda System,"](#) *Monthly Review* 62, No. 1, May, 2010; and Peter Erlinder, "The UN Security Council Ad Hoc Rwanda Tribunal: International Justice or *Juridically*-Constructed 'Victor's Impunity'?" *DePaul Journal for Social Justice*, Vol. 4, No. 1, Fall 2010, pp. 131-214.

[5] George Friedman, ["Libya, the West and the Narrative of Democracy,"](#) *Stratfor*, March 21, 2011.

[6] See, e.g., Joseph Felter and Brian Fishman, ["Al-Qa'ida's Foreign Fighters in Iraq: A First Look at the Sinjar Records,"](#) Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, 2007; ["Africans Hunted Down in 'Liberated' Libya"](#) (*afrol News*, 28 February 2011); Peter Dale Scott, ["Who Are the Libyan Freedom Fighters and Their Patrons?"](#) *The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus*, Vol. 9, Issue 13, No. 3, March 28, 2011; Wolfgang Weber, ["Libyan Rebels Massacre Black Africans,"](#) *World Socialist Web Site*, 31 March 2011.

[7] See Beau Grosscup, ["Cluster Munitions and State Terrorism,"](#) *Monthly Review* 62, No. 11, April, 2011.

[8] See, e.g., ["Fewer See Clear Goal in Libya; Opposition to Arming Rebels,"](#) Pew Research Center for the People & the Press (U.S.), April 5, 2011; and ["Political Poll for *The Independent*,"](#) ComRes (U.K.), March 29, 2011.

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