

The Prescience of the Untimely: A Review of *Arab Spring, Libyan Winter*

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Vijay Prashad, *Arab Spring, Libyan Winter*, AK Press, 2012, 271pp, pbk. \$14.95
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Nearly a decade ago, I sat in a class entitled, quite simply, “Corporations,” taught by Vijay Prashad at Trinity College. Over the course of the semester, I was amazed at the extent of Prashad’s knowledge, and the complexity and erudition of his style. He has since authored a number of classic books that have gained recognition throughout the world. *The Darker Nations*, a peoples’ history of the Third World, sent defibrillating shockwaves through an academic world that had almost forgotten the epic scope and historic dignity of the non-aligned movement and post-colonial struggles. In his recent, award-winning work, *Arab Spring, Libyan Winter*, Prashad delves into his capacious knowledge of the Third World to excavate the discourses and narratives surrounding the upheavals of 2011.

“Revolutions have no specific timetable,” states Prashad in the opening line of this exciting and provocative look at contemporary events. Instantly, an atmosphere of suspense emerges. The reader is alerted to the problem of history. Does the making of history then involve a suspension of historical time, or is it a continuous narrative structure into which events must eventually be integrated? *Arab Spring, Libyan Winter* shows that the answer to the question, “How is history made?” lies just as easily in the asking.

The first half of the book works through the events that transpired to bring about the explosive popular uprisings of Arab Spring: Tunisia and Egypt, Yemen and Bahrain. But the events are not put together in a cohesive, chronological fashion. Using an uncommonly gripping style more akin to the folk-story motif of the *djeli* than to traditionally Orientalist academia, Prashad suspends a given situation, points out its components, and traces back the characters and genealogies that define each link before resuming a narrative. Every moment is an end to itself, and an origin of something different. Thus, the making of history becomes the suspension of its own progress, its catastrophic “stability,” in a process of differentiation through inclusion.

Empirically, one might suggest that history is a condition of time, and by extension, of the subject, but history is also an eminent producer of the Subject and her concept of time through memory and narrative. Hence, history is often overdetermined by a dominant narrative of the sovereign. The apparently chaotic composition of Prashad’s historicity is, then, an interstitial morphology of resistance. It illustrates that the time to act for the

revolutionary lies in the gaps within the dominant historical realities. It points out the sorties of signifiers constituting nothing in the obliterated ruins of history. Through such illuminations, *Arab Spring, Libyan Winter* breaks through “the surface of history” to elaborate revolution’s snapping synapses, exploding interruptions and breaches, connecting flows.

Messianic Politics

It is tempting to think, 'History is either singular, or it is diffuse. It is either one coherent factual narrative, or it is comprised of the *aletheia* of the multitude.' Yet the reader finds Prashad examining the structure of history on multiple levels. For Prashad, world history is shaped by geographically defined political movements, such as communism or national liberation, with historical agents like the working class for the former and the nationalist militant for the latter. Religion, however, is another matter: “Religion has an unshakable eschatology which a post-utopian secular politics lacks.” Within the *telos* of religion, there appears on the horizon the image of Benjamin’s thoughts on messianic time—time as “a small fissure in the continuous catastrophe,” a break with history, may contain an ultimate redemption of the human beyond the political power struggle. Succoring the split between geo-political and utopian-religious (messianic) time in the context of Arab Spring, Prashad indicates that the base of “the deep desire and commitment to some form of democracy” is forged by the affinity between eschatological Islamist politics with the People.

To think about the Subject of messianic time in the context of the lack of a “coherent timetable” for emancipatory politics, it is perhaps best to return to the modern tradition of Martin Luther King, Jr., whose prefigurative blending of liberation theology and emancipatory politics became most important during his works of 1963, the climactic year of “The Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” the March on Washington, and the bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church. In “The Letter,” King states the point bluntly:

Frankly, I have yet to engage in a direct-action campaign that was “well timed” in view of those who have not suffered unduly from the disease of segregation. For years now I have heard the word “wait!” It rings in the ear of every Negro with piercing familiarity. This “Wait” has almost always meant “Never.” We must come to see, with one of our distinguished jurists, that “justice too long delayed is justice denied.”

The timing of rebellious action must not be a part of history. It must *change* history. The *kairos* appears spontaneous and untimely in its convulsive, shocking presence, yet it is, deeper still, a path, a *longue durée*, forged through diligent and rigorous praxis.

King put a finer point on the path of historic liberation in his declaration in his 1963 speech at Western Michigan University: “[T]ime is neutral.... Somewhere along the way we must see that time will never solve the problem alone but that we must help time. Somewhere we must see that human progress never rolls in on the wheels on inevitability. It comes through the tireless efforts and the persistent work of dedicated individuals who are willing to be co-workers with God. Without this hard work, time itself becomes an ally of the insurgent and primitive forces of irrational emotionalism and social stagnation. We must always help time and realize that the time is always right to do right.” Time, then, exists in “the neutral,” while action must turn to the *kairos*,

not only of taking time, but taking the right time. By turning our relation to time into *kairos*, we move time from its context within history to a duration between histories—the *longue durée* of Messianic time.

The implementation of neutrality in this context suggests a broad space of time to extend through the valley of positive and negative. In Roland Barthes's lectures from 1978, the neutral takes place in this minimal distance of non-conflict that exists outside of two extremes. It is, in the words of Maurice Blanchot, "the non-general, the non-generic, as well as the non-specific." For Blanchot, the neutrality of time permeates life as death, impassive and beyond control; such is the neutrality of messianic time, which permeates the charge of history, changing the "I" into the "one." The neutrality of time therefore implicates history in a case against extremism, showing that the work of the radical is not to tend to any particular side, but to have the time to navigate through the terrible terrain of history by altering its course, its patterns and rhythms of movement, connection, sociality. Hence, one does not simply "make history," one alters the course of history in accordance to "the right time." The historical path toward emerging power is transmitted as a gesture to the outside of history, against history; a gesture as simple as reaching out.

Thus a counterhistory, to use Foucault's term, is brought forward as the guide of time past a point of no return, a Rubicon, the point where the normal path of history falls to the past. The subject, who must be the only true agent of history, facilitates time through helpfulness, and both the Subject and her history become decentered in relation to one another. Yet history negates the neutrality of time. As Barthes discloses, although the neutral is the "thought and practice of the nonconflictual, it is nevertheless bound to assertion, to conflict, in order to make itself heard." Engaged with history, time is charged with a destiny, and becomes an opposition. As Prashad insists, "For Arab lands, the events of early 2011 were not the inauguration of a new history, but the continuation of an unfinished struggle that is a hundred years old." The emergence of the Subject during Arab Spring did not conceive of a new history, but changed the path of history toward a different destiny. "Historical grievances combined with inflationary pressures now met with the subjective sense that victory might be at hand—this was not simply a protest to scream into the wind, but a protest to actually remove autocrats from their positions of authority. The facts of resistance had given way to the expectation of revolutionary change." The negativity of this charge toward "revolutionary destiny" rendered control, as a positive force, seriously lacking.

The lack of control lies in the problem that the Subject is not totally detemporalized or timeless, but untimely in her presence. The Subject is untimely, because her work is visionary, and it is only through such visionary work that the Rubicon can be crossed. Still, the crossing of this border is haunted by anxiety over an impending disaster that lays in wait. It is only through the form of what Benjamin calls divine violence, captivated not with the justice of the means, but the ends—the transformation of history—that a revelation of history's traumatic foundations can be liberated, and patterns and rhythms of time developed throughout obscured traditions awakened. In this situation, the Subject appears to be outside of right, but setting the state to rights. Because her position is correct, in-so-far as the rebelling subject rebels due to a lack of recognition, her representation appears outside of the norm, which is mistaken as right. Therefore, such visionary work must be carried out through obscured traditions, underground, away from the surveillance of empire.

Explaining his method from the start along the lines of Marx's metaphor of the mole, Prashad insists, "It is the burrowing that is essential, not simply the emergence onto the surface of history." *Arab Spring, Libyan Winter* is a book on uncharted networks of time, spread out over the 252 pages like an elaborate spider's web of passages intertwining with and overwhelming the machinery of the state. Although untimely, Arab Spring was not a flash in the pan, or a Facebook or Twitter revolution. Prashad notes that the government's suspension of these tools led to further radicalism by furthering communications through face-to-face encounters. In existential terms, Arab Spring might be thought of as a revolution of Being over *techné*, an uprising of the unchartable, infinite potential of the Other.

The name of this Other is found in Chance. The faith of the revolution lies in the proper decentering of the subject, its giving to the Other of time, for only with respect to time does history actually appear on the horizon of the subject, rather than as an imposition. This time of historical agency appears as a moment when anything can happen—a revolutionary truth event where everything comes into question while being realized in its Otherness as a community of the people begins anew in the streets amidst discourse, friendship, reconfigurations of hegemony, and a becoming of a constituent power.

Throwing a wrench into the gears of the "cobwebbed tradition" of Orientalism, the decentering of history in *Arab Spring, Libyan Winter* is a defining quality of its impassioned revolutionary cry. But perhaps the most paradigmatic points of the book emerge from the unexpected voices. To make the connection between the particular manifestations of revolutionary demands to the general historic terms of revolution, Prashad quotes an anonymous young Egyptian in Tahrir Square, who reminds us, "[T]he French Revolution took a very long time so the people could eventually get their rights." Far from timelessness, the historicization of Arab Spring must exist precisely within the most uncanny appearance of time, as something that does not appear to come from the natural state of time as we know it, but in arriving has completely transformed the way that we understand time.

Strange Monsters

Revolution is never as simple as a revolt from below against a rusting structure of elites trying to remain in power. As with the French Revolution, Arab Spring consisted of complex familial ties, outside interests, and religious factions fighting alongside, often in awkward juxtaposition to, liberals, working class parties, farmers, and students. It is perhaps because of this historically difficult and incongruous composition that the Arabic word for revolution is *thawra*, referring to the image of the bull, or *thawr*, which has religious significance as a pagan deity for the Ancient Semitic tribes and Carthaginians. If Daniel Guérin was correct in saying, "Anarchism and Marxism drink from the same spring," then it is quite a different oasis that drove the thirsty beast of revolution through what Prashad calls, "the Libyan labyrinth."

Recalling Bataille's *Acéphale*, the intestinal labyrinth gains significance as the mode of metabolism and rumination in which, "(the Acephale) has lost himself, loses me with him, and in which I discover myself as him, in other words, as a monster." Unraveling the discourse of the revolution, the flows of power and hegemony—from Qaddafi's nationalist coup in 1969 to the wars with Chad from 1978 to 1987, the neoliberal reforms of the 1990s to, finally, the War on Terror—we find that the metabolic process of *Libyan Winter* ends in the production of oil. In a process of what Prashad calls "involution," Qaddafi's bellicose policies, along with his attempts to nationalize Islam

together with oil, mutated the source of his power, turning his house against itself. Already a divided nation, with its two major cities on opposite geographic sides of the country, Libya became split between two opposed political powers—liberal reformists and staunch nationalists—as Qaddafi’s political disengagement manifested through what can only be described in psychoanalytic terms as a recursive *passage à l’acte* (mysteriously calling Wikipedia “Kleenex,” declaring that opponents drank hallucinogens with their instant coffee, and so on).

Prashad declares, “The mercurial style that Qaddafi adopted was not about his personality alone, but also a leader’s natural response to a system that relied upon power brokers whose own loyalty... did not have any ideological commitment to the system.” As in the case of other nations during Arab Spring, the true expression of revolt was an outward exposition of what had inwardly been happening in microcosmic societies throughout the realm—from indigenous tribes to political parties, for a century, the people, partly motivated by (and in resistance to) economic impositions of development, had been changing the traditional social compositions and participating in what Ruth Wilson Gilmore calls, “the relative autonomy of the movement from the leaders.” It was this empowerment of political reconfigurations taking place under the context of new democratic assemblages that shocked the elites and evoked such a powerful response.

Unlike Qaddafi’s awkward policy choices and rants, real acts of power from the West were clear and decisive. Prashad sets the stages of war and diplomacy, far removed from the deserts, mountains, and cities that forged the backdrop of popular politics. Taking place under the now-classic architecture of the “four pillars” of US interests—oil, the War on Terror, Israel, and the circumvention of Iranian hegemony—we find elites rubbing elbows in “Heliopolist cocktail parties and hushed conferences in Kasr al-Ittihadiya” as well as the Concorde-Lafayette hotel in Paris, which provides the setting for a meeting of anti-Qaddafi figures consolidating their power.

These scenes are buttressed with the careful portraiture of key historical actors. As Prashad brings the stage of history to life, we find the diplomats and liberals like Frank Wisner, whose career has brought him from Enron in the late 1990s to the Obama Administration, under the aegis of which he was meeting with Mubarak about military support during Arab Spring. We spy the provocateurs, for instance, *gauche cavalier*, Bernard Henri-Levy, who telephones Sarkozy from Benghazi about the need for more NATO air strikes. We follow the rebel military establishment as it suffers mysterious deaths and even more mysterious assents (like that of apparent CIA cohort, Khalifa Hifter). In each of these intriguing characters, we find different representations of the security state biopolitique: an oil-injected reification that drives Arab Spring from the resentment of rising food prices to the brink of implosion in Libyan Winter.

Reminiscent of the scenes of Cold War soirées represented in old Bond films, the aristocratic fight for oil against democracy that was Libyan Winter presents a harsh truth that the new global crisis is simply the continuation of the old history: the global exploitation of capitalism waged against the imagination of the people. As Benjamin laments, “The labyrinth is the right path for the person who always arrives early enough at his destination. This destination is the marketplace.” Yet, “(t)he labyrinth is the habitat of... a humanity (a class) which does not want to know where its destiny is taking it.” Thus, the labyrinth leads, like the desert, only further into itself. As Blanchot explains, “The desert is even less certain than the world; it is never anything but the approach to the desert.” Only the visionary can take time out of the involution toward oblivion.

It is here, in this approach to and escape from history, that we find ourselves within Benjamin's Golgotha, Blanchot's desert: A space of indeterminate uncertainty where we become familiar only with our own exile. Blanchot writes, "For the moderated and moderate man, the room, the desert, and the world are strictly determined places. For the man of the desert and the labyrinth, devoted to the error of a journey necessarily a little longer than his life, the same space will be truly infinite, even if he knows that it is not, all the more so since he knows it." The desert, as allegory, provides an eschatology, a mortality in the destiny of Arab Spring. But any allegory of nature might lead to a labyrinthine eschatology (for example, in Bachelard, the forest presents "a limitless world"); the prescience of the untimely is always an uncanny acceptance of the infinite within the finite—the outside of what is understood. Transgenerational and occupied with the image of the future, the untimely makes otherness its home as it proceeds toward liberation.

In the work of helping time navigate this dangerous passage of history, Prashad illustrates that the more violent break with history may have occurred in the peaceable struggles of Tahrir Square, and not in the military clashes of Qaddafi with his former Generals who defected to the CIA and NATO countries. It might be possible to suggest, then, that in the case of Tunisia and Egypt, the historical subject of the people was drawn together in a Dionysian dance of different rhythms in the marvelous realm of the ancients, while we fear that the case of Libya suggests an Apollonian future where time, itself, may lay dying under the machinic hand of history. The properly Nietzschean inversion would follow: time is dead, for history has killed it.

Yet, if time is dead, struck down in Golgotha, exposed in the desert, mauled by the *thawra*, it is only in the present sense that it is rendered impossible outside of the context into which the untimely has thrown us. Thus, if history becomes an art of revolution, life as being-towards-death (death as the provocation of the neutrality of time) becomes what Benjamin calls "the allegory of resurrection" through the glorious ruins of history. Prashad ends his work with a rousing finale: "The time of the impossible has presented itself. In Egypt, where the appetite for the possibilities of the future are greatest, the people continue to assert themselves into Tahrir Square and other places, pushing to reinvigorate a Revolution that must not die... For them the slogan is simple: Down with the Present. Long live the Future. May it be so."