



Postcolonialism or postmodernism?

An interview with Susan Buck-Morss

Chris Mansour

*On February 11, 2011—the day Hosni Mubarak resigned the office of President of Egypt—Chris Mansour interviewed Susan Buck-Morss, professor of political philosophy and social theory at Cornell University and author of *The Origin of Negative Dialectics* and *Thinking Past Terror: Islamism and Critical Theory on the Left*, on behalf of the Platypus Review. What follows is an edited transcript of their conversation.*

Chris Mansour: What were the stakes of introducing Critical Theory into a postmodern culture that widely considered its ideas obsolete? Are we in a similar climate today? How does Adorno's critique of the authoritarian state speak to us now, after the dismantling of the welfare state over the last 30 years?

Susan Buck-Morss: First, I do not think of Critical Theory as something you apply or do not apply. I simply consider dialectics, as a philosophical tool, valid in the same way that mathematics, as a tool, is valid. I do not see it as belonging to a certain era. It is true that Marx and many Marxists argue that dialectics is the hinge that turns the critical analysis of the economy into a predictable scenario for the future, but that will not work, not today. I do not think a dialectical analysis of society will discover what Georg Lukács called the "subject-object of history"¹—the "new proletariat" or the necessary one. That is a strained argument to make in the present. The connection is broken. But it nonetheless seems theory can be beneficial for social change only if theory is attentive to a dialectical method, by which I simply mean a method that can embrace antithetical extremes without insisting that logic eliminate that antithesis. As Adorno said, the antithesis exists in reality. It is a contradictory reality that we cannot wish away in thought. Anytime we think we can, our thought is not capturing the world.

CM: Adorno also writes about the hope for a time in which dialectics are no longer necessary. Doesn't this suggest that dialectics is a historically specific method, bound to capital?

SBM: By the time Adorno and Horkheimer wrote *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, it is not clear whether they considered capital the only antagonistic social form, and thus the only one to which dialectical analyses apply. What Adorno says in the first line of *Negative Dialectics* is that philosophy lives on because the moment to realize it was missed. By that he really means that if Lukács had been right, and revolution had, at a certain moment in history, been able to

resolve the contradictions of class society, then dialectical philosophy might not be the necessary mode of attack. But reading Adorno, one begins to think that a moment of complete absence of contradiction is never going to come—nor should it. With dialectics we are talking about a mode of critique that reveals a rational capacity of humans exceeding the degree of substantive rationality that we have been able to realize in the social world. So long as we can look at reality and say, “It could be better, it should be better,” critique is a necessary part of theory. Dialectical critique affirms some possibility in the world through a critical negation of the present state of things. The world is heading towards catastrophe, but it is also less likely to get there as you critique its present forms. You have to keep both levels of analysis, positive and negative, in play.

CM: Do these different levels—the world is doomed, the world might be saved—also track with a distinction between postmodernism and modernism? Towards the end of *The Dialectics of Seeing*, you write that “postmodern” and “modern” are not necessarily markers of an epoch, but markers of a political disposition.² Could you elaborate on that?

SBM: In brief, I think postmodernity is a conceptual dead end. I do not accept it as a stage of history. At best, “postmodern” is described by Fredric Jameson as being synonymous with late capitalism. But Jameson was enormously optimistic to equate late capitalism with postmodernity, as if this meant there still was a possibility of radical change. How late is late capitalism? It seems to me as if it is only noon. It just keeps going. Capital keeps feeding crises, and keeps restructuring itself when the crises are over. Nothing, it seems to me, is more true than the critique of capital as a system. Yet it is not as though we just criticize capital, and then it becomes obvious what we should do. We know that capitalism cannot solve certain problems of social inequality or the ecological limits to growth. We know that uncontrolled and unregulated, it inevitably pushes toward a greater gap between rich and poor. That is the so-called “free market” at work. There is nothing wrong with it from the neoclassical economist’s perspective, but there is something horrifying about the dominance of the profit-motive as the value of social life. “Postmodernity” has become, really, the word for the culture of capitalism today. My own feeling is that if you want to look for the seeds of what is presently, productively possible in social and cultural life, look to the postcolonial moment, rather than the postmodern Western moment.

CM: It is interesting that you make a distinction between the two, since it seems that “postmodern” and “postcolonial” are often treated more or less synonymously. How do they differ, in your view?

SBM: The problem for modern postcolonial artists, for example, was not “postmodernity;” it was how to be new and national at the same time. It was a problem of how to be modern without mimicking the West, because it was assumed that postcolonial artists could only be

late arrivals to the places the Western artists already have gone. Instead, postcolonial artists produced a hybrid form of modernity with local traditions, which I find far more generative of what is possibly new and interesting today in the art world than following the line of "postmodernity" which, in the art world today, is too often simply another word for "the market has control." In the work of Wilfredo Lam, for example, one sees an artist who was not simply following Picasso, but actually working out a new problematic in the context of being an Afro-Cuban, Asian citizen of Cuba who then spent time in Paris before returning to Cuba to do his best work.

To take a more recent and dramatic example, there are crowds today out in the street in Cairo. Those brave people are not "finally becoming pro-democracy, just like us." Quite frankly, we cannot match them today. We Americans can barely get a crowd out to defend democratic reform. The Egyptians are in the vanguard of democracy today. It is not as though they are finally catching up, while we are "postmodern" and "beyond democracy." We never made it. The reasons why we never made it are precisely why they might: In Egypt there are strong, independent unions out on the streets today, threatening what may amount to something like a general strike in the country. They might be able to close down the Suez Canal, or at least they can threaten to do that. One-tenth of the world's trade goes through that canal. Now that's power. A small group can really screw up the works. But all of this is happening there. They are in the forefront, and are not at all "postmodern."

Some elements of modernity were never realized, the fundamental one being the unresolved contradiction between political democracy and economic capitalism. Egypt, Turkey, and Tunisia are at the forefront of that fundamental contradiction. We have to look to them for guidance, to see what they can accomplish and where they might go wrong.

CM: For Egypt to be in the vanguard for democracy today and represent the project of completing modernity, wouldn't these uprisings have to be a global phenomenon?

SBM: First, to clarify, I would say that Egypt is now in the vanguard of *socialist* democracy, because the workers are organized, and they are seeking to redistribute the wealth. And if you close down the Suez Canal, that *is* a global phenomenon, right? After the last economic crisis of capital, the movements that protested against structural readjustment in Greece, Spain, or Italy, all have reason to be in solidarity with the Egyptian protests. If you look at 1912, around the time of the Second International, there were a lot of demonstrations. At that time, unions were organized in national units that would send people to international conferences. The Second International and certainly the Third were organized nationally and tried—but had serious problems—forming an international organization on that basis. Now, from Tunis to Iran, Lebanon, and Syria, we already have international solidarity with what is happening in Egypt, but it centers on national goals—protesting the policies of their own, specific governments. That, to me, seems right, because you have to deal politically with your own country. What Egypt represents globally—international solidarity producing national political

goals—is a better and potentially more successful model than the Second International. With Egypt we are talking about the autonomy of particular states and the universality or globality of the protest movement. This, in particular, is exciting.

The 1968 moment was also global in a way the Second International was not. It marked the beginning of an electronic network, inaugurated by live TV reporting, that allowed these movements to spread among people who were not in longstanding contact. With global media reporting, you didn't need international meetings. That was the spontaneous part of 1968. However, when you get into a local context, you do need organization. You need the capacity to delineate a national territory as your domain of political action, because only as a citizen of a particular nation-state can you acquire power.

The turning point in media coverage was 1968, though we saw its power again with the fall of the Berlin Wall. After that, one by one, the leaders of the socialist countries fell out of power. Now it is the Arab countries who are producing a global effect at the level of a discourse of Islam, or a discourse of postcolonialism, shared by many different social groups. This is far better as a model today than organizing workers on the basis of what they have in common—namely, that they are workers. It doesn't make much sense now, when so much affect is not around a category like "worker," but ones like "youth," "nation," "ethnicity," "women," or whatever. Workers are one such organizational category, but not the exclusive vanguard.

CM: Looking back to when politics did center around the worker—or perhaps more precisely, the proletariat—do you think this focus was adequate then?

SBM: At a time when more people were organized as workers, they worked twelve-hour days, seven days a week. It was their life. Now we have a capitalist system that does not exploit the working class in the same crass way, or at least it primarily does so only locally. Instead it throws out superfluous workers, so you get rising unemployment, with pockets of the more traditional industrial working classes, in Western China, or in parts of Brazil and Mexico. These pockets do remain, but workers are now a much more nuanced, fragmented collective overall, with many different styles of life. Peasants have to play a part here, too, because they are still a huge part of the global working classes. Marx never had much hope for peasants' capacity to act, but in contemporary times things are very different.

CM: The political role of peasants was a major point of discussion in the First and Second International, but it also received much attention in the student movements, with the rising influence of Maoism in the New Left during 1960s and 1970s. How, if at all, do the ways the student movement theorized the importance of peasants figure into political struggles today?

SBM: I hesitate to use the term "Maoism," as it has such a bad name for anyone who knew what was going on in China at the time. But in India, for example, political awareness has been far more advanced than in the West concerning peasant exploitation under conditions of capitalism, and the potential political power of peasants. The key here is the old Marxist notion of ownership of the means of production. If you can produce the food for yourself and your family, you are ahead of things. South Korea is now buying up land in the Arab world and in Africa, claiming that the peasants who are pushed off the land can get other work. Perhaps so, but they will no longer own the means of production, with enormous social consequences.

But you spoke of the New Left of the 1960s and 1970s. What is left of this Left today? Intellectual debates have become scholastic. What are we in America, which has the best academic system in the world, doing right now? Often we are arguing over whether Deleuze's notion of "planarity" is to be followed or whether we should be Agambenians and talk about *homo sacer*. These are perhaps politically powerful concepts, but they end up in such a hermetic discussion that they never get into the global public sphere.

CM: You have weighed in on political issues with greater public visibility, particularly the politics around Islam. How did you view the relationship of Islam to the Left in 2001, when you wrote *Thinking Past Terror*, and how do you see that relationship today?

SBM: What I called "political Islam" refers to a moment when the discourse of Islam became politically available as the basis for a powerful critique of the kind of modernity that Adorno and Horkheimer were also criticizing. What I have found increasingly important is the notion of "generations," by which I don't simply mean the moment of birth, one's chronological age, but the moment in which one comes to critical, political awareness—the moment one enters history in this sense.

A number of figures seem to be part of a postcolonial generation dealing with a certain kind of critique of the West. Malcolm X, in 1964, dropped the Islamic nationalism and went for a more orthodox, universal notion of Islam. That year, Sayyid Qutb published his book *Milestones*, criticizing the established Islamic teachers and Nasser's government at the same time. He also used Marxist concepts, talking about the "bloated capitalists," and so on. Around this time, Mahmoud Mohammed Taha in Sudan was claiming that the Meccan revelations in the Qur'an advocate absolute equality among races and between men and women. He was accused of heresy and killed for it, but he was saying it nonetheless, and his theories are part of the legacy of political Islam. Then you have Ali Shariati translating Frantz Fanon into Farsi. All of these figures were critical of the idea that history necessarily went in a certain direction. Marx was just as guilty of projecting this telos as Adam Smith or Hegel. The Soviet Union as well as the U.S. adopted similar notions of history as progress, and with this came the assumption that "development" in an economic sense necessarily entailed "development" in a political and social sense.

CM: Seeing Islam as an integral struggle for the Left cuts against the critique of messianic visions of emancipation as well as against the secularism for which the Left has traditionally fought. Does the embrace of politicized Islam by leftists risk theocratizing leftism?

SBM: What you have to worry about is fundamentalism. Many capitalist economists are market fundamentalist, and they are as dangerous as Khomeini, if not more so. Orthodoxy, too—political or religious—is dangerous when it means there is only one right answer and all who disagree should be dismissed, or even die for being heretics or revisionists. That could be Stalin as well as Khomeini—the latter’s revolution, incidentally, was a classic French Revolution: It begins with a bloody overthrow and public executions, and then the attempt to sustain a reign of moral purity (as with Saint-Just). I do not see a radical break in strategy between these two revolutions. I do not think the Iranian Revolution was laudable, as Foucault did. What was bad about one was bad about the other.

We might consider today the political possibilities of the visibility of an event, in terms of the tactical power of nonviolence in the face of violence, which was effective in the case Gandhi or Martin Luther King, Jr., and which seems to be effective on the streets of Cairo. From this you begin to see the possibilities of a different kind of revolutionary practice that does not involve beheadings or the silencing of multiple voices.

I am not sure the West has ever been secular. I am not sure that any sovereign power can be. What we saw in Mubarak’s last speech was a total disconnect between his presumption of sovereignty and the people’s understanding of him: On the split screen showing his speech juxtaposed to the angry demonstrators, the legitimacy of Mubarak’s sovereignty evaporated. The people became sovereign. Carl Schmitt was right: Sovereignty is the seat of legitimacy, not legality, and even for secular rulers, legitimacy has a religious aura. What causes that change, the assumption of legitimacy at the level of the people, is almost mystical. It is about our hope, our belief, in something more than we experience. That gets to the transcendent. Then we are not in the realm of secular science, which does not give this moment of enthusiasm any legitimacy, yet we feel it. In modernity the idea of “the people” itself is a religious, mystical idea.

CM: This makes me think of the idea of certain Marxists for whom utopia was something “out there,” something not yet in the present, but for whom utopia was secular. Does this understanding of utopia approach what you have been saying about Egypt?

SBM: No, because I *do* think we see it embodied, which is a very Christian notion. With Egypt we have the incarnation, the embodiment, of the idea of “the people.” I am not simply defending or affirming it. I’m just saying that even in the so-called secular era, it is still our reality, and I can become enthusiastic about it, too. Utopia is different, because it insists “I don’t see it now.” But when you look at those pictures of the protestors in Egypt, what excites you is that you do see people actually enacting an idea. There is a simply overwhelming

promise of possibility. Politically it is the most sublime experience, and it is not graspable by a totally secular consciousness. Yet there is no denying this experience.

CM: There is almost an intoxication, it seems, to the excitement of this moment. It occurs to me that, to the amazement of the Left, Iran became a more repressive state in the aftermath of 1979, as did the newly independent Arab “socialist” republics in the 1950s–60s. Isn’t there good reason, then, to remain levelheaded? At what point does one need to sober his or her senses?

SBM: It is not always evident. Adorno was nervous about the student movement of the sixties, after all. This enthusiasm is not something I am simply affirming, but it is something I have experienced. How does one know when to trust such enthusiasm? For Adorno, any time euphoria makes a movement intolerant toward dissent, toward those who think differently, you have crossed a line into the wrong political space. I agree with that, essentially. It would be crazy, though, to say that the West is secular and therefore does not have this danger. Fascism was secular rule.

In addition to tolerating dissent, I would stress nonviolent tactics, which are utterly realistic in that they may even try to provoke the other side to violence. Nonetheless, it is about being prepared to be harmed rather than trying to harm others. The politics of nonviolence comes into its own with Gandhi. It emerges in the postcolonial context, at a time when cameras are there to record the violence of those who want to put down nonviolent demonstration. It is a new reality. Unlike the Old Left it does not simply take up arms.

CM: What about the anticolonial and postcolonial struggles that did pursue violent tactics?

SBM: Yes, there’s Fanon, Che Guevara, and so forth. But they may not represent the future of the Left. Nonviolent action that takes responsibility for all that it entails is rife with potential. The path to the future is in the way those millions of Egyptians refused fear and kept solidarity with all the citizenry, and even picked up after themselves at the demonstrations. They were so beautiful—showing a civic awareness and responsibility even as they put their lives on the line, and they won. That is very much in the tradition of Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. That is the future, and it came from that postcolonial moment. Compared to that, George Bush’s policy of sending in the troops to “bring democracy to Iraq” seems like a dinosaur. The postmodern future would be the drones that are even more inhumane than if there were pilots in them.

CM: Much of what you have said hinges on how we understand the Left after postcolonial movements, but what of the Left prior to that? Could you elaborate on how the long history of the Left figures into this, for you?

SBM: The whole discourse of “the enemy” or “the class enemy” in the Old Left was about

putting people against the wall and shooting. I do not consider it progressive anymore, if it ever was, to justify violent insurrection on the basis that the state was not going to fall on its own. Fanon said the same thing in the context of postcolonial struggles, which despite his call for a break from Europe unfortunately often followed the same model as the Old Left.

CM: So the postcolonial paradigm is really the only place to look to, right now?

SBM: The postcolonial moment entailed shifts in culture and in politics—but in economics, I'm not so sure. There is no doubt that the global economy is totally out of control and is not going to rectify itself. I would make a distinction between the market and capital, here. Even the market is destroyed by capital.

So I find the critique of global capital convincing, but I'm not sure how the political converges with capitalism. There is a huge problem in how to bring together a critique of the global economy with politics and culture without the working class being the hinge that does it because, as we discussed earlier, I don't think that can work.

CM: What do you think the role of leadership would be in these nonviolent movements? In particular, what do you think the intellectual's role is globally with respect to them?

SBM: As far as leaders go, Rashid al-Ghannushi is an interesting figure. Tunisian-born, an early proponent of militant Islam, he lived in European exile until he came back to Tunis a few days ago. What's going to be the role he plays? With President Obama you could see it coming: As soon as he took office, the power in the U.S. was going to be his worst enemy. He's trapped in it. He can't be the kind of leader he might have been. He is lost now.

Although I don't agree with everything he says, more of us should take a cue from Slavoj Žižek. Recently I saw him being interviewed with Tariq Ramadan by al-Jazeera.³ More intellectuals need to get out on such a split screen. We should be brave enough to stand there in the naked immediacy of the political situation, rather than cloaking ourselves in academic scholarship before we dare to speak.

CM: So you are saying that more public debate and dialogue are necessary, so that contesting views could challenge each other in public?

SBM: But in order to show that they are not contesting. Identity politics would not have imagined them in the same place, but Žižek and Ramadan were absolutely on the same side! That's more interesting to me than a "face off."

CM: Perhaps Žižek and Ramadan do not have important political differences regarding Egypt, or else their differences remain opaque. But as the situation plays out, might differences in ideology not come to emerge and clash, and wouldn't this actually be an important, politically

salutary development?

SBM: I don't think ideology is always so important. Žižek is against dictators because he lived under one. He knows what a dictator looks like. In one of the documentaries that came out of Iraq, a foot soldier in the American military says, "You know, if an armed guy who couldn't speak my language broke into my house and got everybody in my family down on the floor, I could not see him as a liberator." This soldier hardly needed a deep understanding of another culture, or a deep understanding of anything, really, to come to that conclusion. You are not a liberator if you invade a country and then come into a private home and terrify a family. You might think you are, just as Mubarak thinks he is a good leader—but you simply are not, and I think I can make that judgment. I do not think ideology comes first. Political judgment is not always, and does not always need to be, mediated by ideology. Often the judgment comes first, and I alter my ideology to allow it. We should be able to change our ideology, after all. We should be able to say, "We thought this, but look, this is happening. Maybe we were wrong."

CM: And you think that the trouble with Marxism, or at least with the more orthodox Marxists, is that the ideology has hardened?

SBM: Right. The capacity to make a judgment is called *ijtihad* in Islam. Imams do that when they issue a fatwa. They say, "I'm looking at this particular human situation, and this is the judgment that I make." The judgment that one imam makes, another may not agree with, and you never judge the same specific situation twice. Look at Lenin. He said, "We thought we would have the revolution first in Germany and the U.S., but we were wrong. We have to think again." That is the mark of a non-dogmatic thinker. If they are not dogmatic, ideologies work, by which I mean that they can be effective ways to communicate collectively. As soon as they become dogmatic, however, ideologies are useless, whether or not they are secular, postmodern, premodern, multicultural, or whatever. It is a matter of judgment, and the leadership must consist of those who exercise good judgment. | P

Transcribed by Chris Mansour

1. See Georg Lukács, "Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat," in *History and Class Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1971), 83–222. In particular, see section three, "The Standpoint of the Proletariat." Available online at <<http://www.marxists.org/archive/lukacs/works/history/index.htm>>.

2. Susan Buck-Morss, *Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), 359.

3. Tariq Ramadan and Slavoj Žižek, interview by Riz Khan, *Riz Khan*, Al Jazeera English, February 11, 2011. Available online at <<http://english.aljazeera.net/programmes/rizkhan/2011/02/2011238843342531.html>>.