Guest editorial

What's in a name?

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Widespread differences exist in views about the implications of political events over the past year in North Africa. All-too-easy characterizations of these events have led to the bandying about of iconic terms such as, “revolutions,” “revolts,” “rebellions,” “uprisings,” and “popular mobilizations.” In turn, as if in recognition of their insufficiently ecological *jeu d'esprit*, many of these terms are then sidled into intimate floral and seasonal couplings (“Jasmine,” “Spring”). Interestingly, in contrast to the other color and floral “revolutions” of recent years, whose locations are understood without further referents, “Arab” and “Islamic” are considered *de rigueur* here. It would be best if we were simply to admit the considerable short- and long-term uncertainties of what might emerge, even if recognizing that “things [seem to] have changed forever.” In short, it's simply too early to tell.

What, then, can we say about these events? At the deliberate risk of minimizing their local significance, here I prefer to look at them as indicating possible vectors of certain longer-term fundamental processes of transformation. In a recent article, van der Pijl (2011) argues that any understanding of the politics of post-colonial states (particularly in the Middle East) requires the consideration of three longstanding, overlapping vectors of influence and control: global capitalism, Western imperialism, and the nature of the post-colonial state. In the light of recent events in the Middle East/North Africa, he focuses his argument on the conjuncture of the latter two, with a nod to the first. Historically, he argues:

The post-colonial state itself thus provides a key ‘remote control’ mechanism by means of which the West can determine the direction of countries nominally emancipated from its tutelage. In general, American [Western?] strategy has been to entrust a client governing class with the keys of the state, on condition that it leave the door open. Within this framework, the West will

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permit various gradations of popular political expression. The range runs from zero, under a dictatorship, through a middling set of pro-capital authoritarian regimes, to parliamentary representation, in which elections can replace one fraction of the governing class with another, but otherwise leave the social order unchanged. There the gradations stop. This is not to say that popular contestation plays no role: it is pressure from below that usually necessitates the transition from one category to another. In a revolutionary situation, however, this controlled step-by-step relaxation of pressure becomes unstable; at that point other forms of imperial intervention may be necessary to ensure the democratic aspirations do not exceed the bounds set by the ‘lock and key’ arrangement with the client governing class – by ‘military action when necessary’.¹

The recent events in North Africa and the Middle East are to be understood as emanating from “a triple crisis: the crisis of Western hegemony, the crisis of capital and the crisis of the nation-state.”² For, “it is the very success of the neoliberal project of the 1980s and 90s [that] has also served to impoverish and de-legitimate the state as a structure of social protection.”³ As a result, “The upshot has been to create a generalized crisis of the nation-state on which Western dominance has rested for so long”⁴ and “it may well be that the current storms raging across the Middle East are part of a planetary depression, signalling a structural weakening of the post-colonial state form through which the West has long exercised its control.”⁵

In this editorial, I only consider the case of Libya, the extreme case of “military action when necessary,” but one, if we are to concur with van der Pijl’s conclusion, which appears to be increasingly likely in the future. I would add that the Libyan case also reveals the newer techniques of influence and control (the levers and “the gear-box” as van der Pijl would have it) to ensure the continuity of older Gramscian strategies of position and of manoeuvre that were always flexibly brought to bear at different moments in different circumstances by Western imperialism.⁶ As usual, these techniques have used both force and “consent,” each applied when necessary; what is new is the increasingly frequent resort to what might be called the “underground or shadow” economy of means of persuasion and of outright coercion to ensure compliance to the overt world of “human rights.”

At the overt level of the latter, the need to ensure legal sanction and the carapace of moral justification led to the innovation of the first explicit use of the R2P

¹ van der Pijl (2011): 29.

² van der Pijl (2011): 48.

³ van der Pijl (2011): 47.

⁴ van der Pijl (2011): 48.

⁵ van der Pijl (2011): 49.

⁶ While the Gramscian alternative of a choice between a “war of position” and a “war of manoeuvre” might be more relevant for politics in a single nation-state, it is less so—in fact restrictive—for foreign relations conducted by nation-states in a multiplicity of global sites, and certainly so for the maintenance of hegemony in a global empire.

(Responsibility to Protect) doctrine⁷ in any UN Security Council Resolution (No. 1973). This doctrine enshrines the right of the UN to sanction “humanitarian intervention” in order to implement embargoes and armed intervention. In the case of Libya, this meant “to take all necessary measures to protect civilians and civilian populated areas.” What is remarkable in the adoption of the resolution is that Lebanon as well as the UK and France proposed it and that it passed by a vote of 10 votes to 0 with 5 abstentions. All the BRICS countries happened to have seats on the Council for this vote: but while Brazil, Russia, India, and China (along with Germany) abstained, South Africa voted for the resolution. Given what could have been foreseen to be subsequent violations of the resolution—in the instance, by NATO and a number of Arab League countries (Qatar, the UAE, and Jordan)—it remains completely unclear, indeed bewildering, why assent by South Africa in particular, and non-objection in the form of abstention by the other BRIC members, was provided to the resolution.

Be that as it may, it would seem that this legal innovation in the utility of the UN as an instrument of global politics portends future grounds for interference in the internal affairs of nation-states, here as the complementary legal counterpart of the development of new military doctrines that stress “rapid deployment forces” [including “special” forces, increasingly used as “liquidation” squads] from a multiplicity of overseas bases.

The second legal innovation in the Libya campaign was the overt appeal to justification for armed intervention on the basis of *selective* calls to action by regional—and not just international—bodies, in this case the Arab League, which may well have provided its assent as the quid pro quo for the Saudi/UAE invasion of Bahrain that propped up the minority Sunni government during that same week. Since Libya is a member of both the Arab League and the African Union—as are the other North African countries—the convenient appeal to only one of the relevant regional organizations, the Arab League, and the subsequent ignoring of the African Union’s many attempts at a negotiated outcome to the conflict, was clearly deliberately effected to contain the Libyan conflict within “the Arab world” and to seal it off from an African one.⁸

⁷ The doctrine was driven by a Canadian initiative, initiated by senior members of the Liberal Party of Canada, formulated and sanctioned by a red-ribbon International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty (ICISS) which released its report (The Responsibility to Protect) in December 2001. Such Commissions form part of the increasing use of self-selected “sages” to develop global policies. The Report was subsequently supported by all the major Canadian federal political parties. It forms part of a new mainstream Canadian political discourse, supported by the media, to “beef up” a Canadian diplomatic and military international “presence” in order to demonstrate that Canada can “punch above its weight”—a pugilism worthy of a secondary Praetorian Guard that longs for a move up the ladder of respectability and significance.

⁸ This was done not only to limit support for the Qaddafi regime, but also to ensure a more effective launching pad for future military operations and economic penetration in Saharan and sub-Saharan Africa. President Obama has recently ordered the introduction of several hundred US “Special forces” as “Advisers” to Uganda and a number of nearby central African countries, with the compliance of these states. The creation of AFRICOM, the latest regional command structure of the US armed forces, with its focus on Africa, is part of the new military strategy of regional deployment, ostensibly implemented because of the “War on Terror,” but clearly intended as part of a longer-term strategy of surveillance and control over African resources and to guard against increasing Chinese economic influence within the

In the meantime, hard realities require hard methods—the underground or shadow economy of means, which ensure the real ends of continuing imperial control. When “the bandwidth of popular sovereignty” (van der Pijl 2011: 37) becomes too dangerous to empire—and this can include popular sovereignty that one seeks to clamber on board with and to use for one’s own purposes, as was the case with the rebel forces in Libya—a ruthless imposition of means becomes necessary. The evidence is overwhelming by now: the prevention of properly accredited Libyan diplomats to have diplomatic access to the US and to UN fora to enjoy the right of representation and vote; aerial attacks not just on military targets but also on selected parts of the civilian infrastructure of the state, with inevitable civilian loss of life; the massive provision of arms supplies by France and Qatar to one side in the conflict in violation of UN Resolutions 1970 and 1973; the introduction of hundreds of “special forces” from France, the UK, the US, Qatar, Jordan, and the UAE that are ignored as “boots on the ground;” the frequently brutal removal, rape or killing of thousands of sub-Saharan African migrants and of “black” Libyans by rebel Libyan forces; the oil embargo not just on sales of Libyan oil, but on the supply of required forms of oil to Libya to ensure ongoing civilian life, and the provisioning of rebel forces and rebel-held civilian areas with oil supplies; the financial embargo conducted through the sequestration of substantial billions of Libyan state funds and assets in the banks of major western capitals, and the outright illegality of the provision of some of these funds to rebel forces prior to their formation as an internationally recognized government of a state; the sometimes crude, but most often sufficiently sophisticated, mainstream media campaign in support of “regime change,” both internally within Libya and internationally⁹; and, not least, the proxy promises of the return of a “debt,” with western government ministers urgently encouraging “their multinationals” to hastily pack their “suitcases” after the conclusion to the conflict—a “recovered” Libya, at last.

I’ll end with a cautionary tale, a recent re-narration of a famous misunderstanding about the naming of events that took place during President Richard Nixon’s trip to China in 1972.¹⁰ When reportedly asked by the visiting American delegation what he thought of the French Revolution, the Chinese Prime Minister Zhou Enlai remarked that it was “Too early to say.” We now know that Zhou was under the mistaken impression that the Americans were asking about a more recent French “revolution”: the 1968 Paris student demonstrations/“revolts” that had, at least for a brief moment, created a crisis for President Charles de Gaulle, the French Fifth Republic, and the French state. Misunderstanding or not, Zhou’s remark was remarkably, and adroitly, sensible.

We will have to wait and see—but the signs are not re-assuring.

Footnote 8 continued

continent. Libyan opposition to AFRICOM, in spite of the country being “brought in from the cold,” was well known—and deeply resented.

⁹ See the Canadian anthropologist Maximilian Forte’s blog site (he is a member of the Dept. of Anthropology, Concordia University, Montreal), which provides his own invaluable contributions to discussion and analysis of various political conflicts around the world, including the Libyan conflict. For this particular point, see his “The Top Ten Myths in the War Against Libya.”

¹⁰ McGregor (2011).

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