

Libya, imperialism and the prostration of the “left” intellectuals: The case of Professor Juan Cole

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Among the most striking features of the US-NATO onslaught against Libya has been the widespread support that this “war of choice” has evoked among left-liberal parties and the affluent middle-class milieu that comprise an important part of their constituency. Waving the banner of “human rights”—the most hypocritical and deceitful of all justifications for imperialist war—the liberal left embraced this war as their own. One would imagine that this was the first time in history that imperialism had proclaimed the cause of “human rights” and democracy as a cloak for its predatory interests!

The left-liberal justifications for the US-NATO bombing of Libya are thick with moral outrage against Colonel Gaddafi, but provide virtually nothing in the way of analysis of the motives and interests of the forces, within Libya and internationally, that are seeking his overthrow. The apologists argue and write as if they were members of a society of amnesiacs. There is no history. Nothing that occurred in the past is remembered. The morally-debased and genocidal record of imperialist colonialism is ignored. There is no reference in these writings to Italian colonialism’s extermination of nearly one half of the Libyan population during its occupation between 1911 and 1940. Nor do they note that the last major joint Anglo-French military action in North Africa, in October-November 1956, was the invasion of Egypt. That action, carried out in collusion with Israel, sought to overthrow the nationalist regime of another Arab colonel, Gamal Abdul Nasser, and reclaim control of the nationalized Suez Canal. Nasser was widely denounced in the British press as a “mad dog” and Prime Minister Anthony Eden plotted his assassination. The Anglo-French invasion failed because the United States, which had its own plans for the region, would not tolerate the attempt by the European imperialists to restore their colonial empires. President Eisenhower compelled the French, British and Israelis to beat a humiliating retreat.

Those who are hailing the attack on Libya as a triumph for the cause of human rights seem to have no recollection at all of the monstrous role played by the United States in attacking and subverting countries that interfered, in one way or another, with its strategic political and economic interests. It is not only the past that is forgotten (Vietnam, the savage war of the “Contras” in Nicaragua, the fomenting of civil wars in Angola and Mozambique, the overthrow and murder of Lumumba in the Congo, the longstanding support for the Apartheid regime in South Africa, the invasion of Iraq); the present is all but ignored. The pro-war “left” assigns to the United States the task of removing Gaddafi for firing on his people, even as Predator drones rain missiles down upon Afghanistan and Pakistan, killing people every day.

A significant example of the response of left-liberal intellectuals to the war is the statement posted March 27 by University of Michigan Professor Juan Cole on his widely-followed “Informed Comment” blog (<http://www.juancole.com>) and subsequently reproduced in the *Nation*. Entitled “An Open Letter to the Left,” Professor Cole, a well-known historian of the Middle East, vociferously defends his support for the attack on Libya.

“I would like to urge the Left to learn to chew gum and walk at the same time,” he writes sarcastically. The problem with the Left, Cole argues, is that it does not know how to adapt its traditional anti-war principles to existing circumstances. He argues that the Left should determine its attitude to wars launched by the United States on “a case-by-case basis. . . .” It “should avoid making ‘foreign intervention’ an absolute taboo the way the Right makes abortion an absolute taboo if doing so makes us heartless (inflexible a priori positions often lead to heartlessness.)” In other words, Cole advocates a pragmatic accommodation with imperialism. “To make ‘anti-imperialism’ trump all other values in a mindless way,” he writes, “leads to frankly absurd positions.”

A significant degree of intellectual confusion, if not dishonesty, is revealed in this remark. “Anti-imperialism” is not a “value”—which must be juggled pragmatically with other values—but a political position that is theoretically grounded in an analysis of the objective economic, social and political structure of global capitalism. Cole seeks to evade such an analysis, which would reveal the essential interests of the capitalist ruling elite that underlie the attack on Libya.

Thus, Cole’s case for war consists entirely of a denunciation of the existing Libyan regime, with his main focus on its crimes, actual and anticipated. “I am unabashedly cheering the liberation movement on and glad that the UNSC [United Nations Security Council]-authorized intervention has saved them from being crushed.” He asserts that without intervention, “Gaddafi would have reestablished himself, with the liberation movement squashed like a bug and the country put back under secret police rule.”

Professor Cole provides no serious analysis of the composition of the “liberation movement,” and derides any reference to Al Qaeda involvement in the protests as “without foundation.” No one familiar with the recent history of Libya, let alone the ongoing conflicts within North Africa and the Middle East, would accept Professor Cole’s judgment on this matter. The activities of Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb in Algeria and Libya play a significant role in the politics of the region. The Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG), considered a branch of Al Qaeda, mounted a major challenge to the Gaddafi regime in the 1990s. The destabilizing impact of that challenge was a major factor in the decision of the Gaddafi regime to abandon its traditional anti-imperialist rhetoric and seek an accommodation with Europe and the United States. As recently as 2007, the Libyan government, according to reports, was bracing for terrorist attacks.

The issue of Al Qaeda’s involvement in the Libyan opposition is, within the context of the US-led “war against terror,” a significant issue—particularly in judging the reasons underlying the US-NATO intervention. It is well known that forces active in the LIFG struggle against Gaddafi in the 1990s who managed to escape Libya after the rebellion’s suppression “began to cooperate more closely with transnational networks outside Libya. Thus all the al-Qaeda field commanders in Afghanistan whose names are currently known are Libyans. Meanwhile, even in Libya itself a substantial recruitment

potential for militant Islamists seems to exist.” [“Between the ‘Near’ and the ‘Far’ Enemy: Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb,” by Guido Steinberg and Isabelle Werenfels, *Mediterranean Politics*, 12: 3, 407-413]

According to this same study, European security agencies “consider al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb the most serious terrorist threat to Western European countries, especially France and Spain where the organization commands a substantial logistical superstructure.” [Ibid] Why, then, are the US and NATO collaborating with these forces?

Professor Cole is certainly aware of these facts, but prefers to ignore them. However, the de facto alliance between the US and Al Qaeda in the struggle against Gaddafi not only exposes the mendacity of the global “War on Terror.” It also demands a deeper examination of the reasons for the assault on Libya.

Professor Cole is quick to dismiss suggestions that the US-NATO intervention may be inspired by anything less than the purest humanitarian motives. He is especially impatient with the idea that the US and NATO are conspiring to overthrow Gaddafi “not to protect his people from him but to open the way for US, British and French dominance of Libya. This argument is bizarre.”

Cole insists that oil plays no role whatever in American and European calculations. That is not all. The professor declares: “There is no prospect of Western companies being allowed to own Libyan petroleum fields, which were nationalized long ago.” One wonders from whom Professor Cole has received his assurances.

Professor Cole continues: “Finally, it is not always in the interests of Big Oil to have more petroleum on the market, since that reduces the price and, potentially, company profits. A war on Libya to get more and better contracts so as to lower the world price of petroleum makes no sense in a world where the bids were already freely let, and where high prices were producing record profits. I haven’t seen the war-for-oil argument made for Libya in a manner that makes any sense at all.”

Professor Cole is not only arguing, we presume, against “vulgar Marxist” critics who insist that there is a connection between imperialist militarism and the economic interests of the transnational corporations. He is also arguing, as a review of his own past writings reveal, against himself.

In an “Informed Comment” blog post dated on August 6, 2006, when he was opposing the “wholesale destruction of all of Lebanon by Israel and the US Pentagon,” Professor Cole presented a very cogent and, as events have shown, prescient analysis of the relationship between Middle Eastern oil and the military operations of the United States. He explained the events in Lebanon as part of a broader, long-term strategy of the United States to acquire control of the major sources of oil and natural gas. The United States, Cole explained, was determined to achieve this objective not only because it needed the oil and natural gas. The United States wanted to restrict the access of potential competitors, such as China and India, to these resources.

Cole precisely answered the claim that the normal operations of the market reduce the need for physical control of oil resources. “I should note that the ‘fungibility’ (easy exchange) of oil is less important in the new environment than it used to be. *US petroleum companies would like to go back to actually owning fields in the Middle East, since there are big profits to be made if you get to decide when you take it out of the ground. ... In our new environment, oil is becoming a commodity over which it does make sense to fight for control.*” [Emphasis added]

Professor Cole warned that the struggle to obtain control over oil resources was a major factor in the American preparations for war against Iran. “In a worst case scenario,” he warned, “Washington would like to retain the option of military action against Iran, so as to gain access to its resources and deny them to its rivals.”

Linking US-backed Israeli operations in Lebanon to broader geostrategic conceptions, Cole offered this perceptive summary of

America’s long-term plans:

“It may be that hawks are thinking this way: Destroy Lebanon and destroy Hizbullah, and you reduce Iran’s strategic depth. Destroy the Iranian nuclear program and you leave it helpless and vulnerable to having done to it what the Israelis did to Lebanon. You leave it vulnerable to regime change, and a dragooning of Iran back into the US sphere of influence, denying it to China and assuring its 500 tcf of natural gas to US corporations. You also politically reorient the entire Gulf, with both Saddam and Khamenei gone, toward the United States. Voila, you avoid peak oil problems in the US until a technological fix can be found, and you avoid a situation where China and India have special access to Iran and the Gulf.

“The second American Century ensues. The ‘New Middle East’ means the ‘American Middle East.’

“And it all starts with the destruction of Lebanon.

“More wars to come, in this scenario, since hitting Lebanon was like hitting a politician’s bodyguard. You don’t kill a bodyguard just to kill the bodyguard. It is phase I of a bigger operation.”

Without explaining why, Professor Cole, it appears, has rejected his own analysis. But even though Professor Cole has changed his mind, his writings in 2006 are an effective refutation of his present pro-war position.

If Cole were proceeding as a historian, he would call to his readers’ attention that the enmity between Libya and the United States dates from Gaddafi’s decision—shortly after leading the September 1969 coup that overthrew the US-backed regime of King Idris—to substantially increase the price of oil. Until Gaddafi’s radical nationalist regime came to power, OPEC pricing was effectively controlled by the United States through the medium of its Saudi Arabian puppets. The action taken by Gaddafi’s new regime signified that the price of oil had passed out of American control and would be influenced by the political calculations of radical nationalists.

Among the first to recognize the danger posed by this new relation of forces was the CIA’s Dr. Henry Kissinger, the national security advisor (and later secretary of state) in the Nixon administration. As Kissinger recalled in his memoirs, Gaddafi was “an avowed radical” who “set out to extirpate Western influence. He did not care if in the process he weakened the global economy.” [*Years of Upheaval* (Boston: 1982), p. 859] Kissinger moved into action at once. “In a meeting of November 24, 1969,” he recalled, “I raised the question whether to have the 40 Committee canvass the possibility of covert action.” [Ibid, pp. 859-86] To Kissinger’s chagrin, he was unable to obtain approval at that time. A decade later, however, the Reagan administration, using a terrorist incident in Berlin as a pretext, ordered an air assault on Tripoli in which Gaddafi himself was targeted.

Cole passes over the history of the last 40 years in silence. He says nothing of the crucial role that Libyan oil plays in the strategic calculations of Europe and the United States, although this has been the subject of extensive analysis in scholarly journals devoted to contemporary geo-politics. He neither mentions, nor explains why, “mad dog” Gaddafi was feted by the European Union in Brussels in 2004, Paris in 2007 and Rome in 2009. Or, for that matter, why Gaddafi’s son Moatessem-Billah al-Gaddafi was welcomed by Hillary Clinton to the State Department in 2009.

One explanation has been given by Professor Derek Lutterbeck and Professor Georgij Engelbrecht, experts on the geo-politics of North Africa. Writing in November 2009, they noted that Libya “now finds itself at the intersection between Western and Russian energy interests...” In an analysis that substantiates the arguments advanced by Cole in 2006, they call attention to Western concerns about Libya’s intentions in relation to efforts by Russia to secure access to its vast oil and natural gas reserves. [“The West and Russia in the Mediterranean: Towards a

Renewed Rivalry,” *Mediterranean Politics*, 14: 3, 385-406]

States have long memories and operate with extended time lines. For the United States and Europe, the disturbances in Libya that broke out in February provided an opportunity to rid themselves of a political and economic irritant that had undermined their control of the global oil market over the last 40 years. Under the cover of popular movements for democracy and social transformation in neighboring Egypt and Tunisia, the United States and Europe moved to overthrow Gaddafi. Despite the fact that Gaddafi had desperately curried favor with the imperialist powers for the past decade, and entered into close economic and security relations, Washington, London and Paris decided that they would replace him with a full-fledged puppet colonial-style regime in Tripoli, and turn the clock 42 years. Thus, whatever the aims of the initial waves of popular protest in Benghazi, the movement was quickly taken under the wing of the imperialist powers. Its agents sought to encourage military-style confrontations with the regime that would provide a “human rights” pretext for the US-NATO intervention. This is a scenario that has been used by imperialism to great effect many times in the past.

Forgetting history, repudiating what he wrote yesterday and ignoring contemporary geo-strategic and class issues, Professor Cole’s writing gives the impression of a man who has completely lost his bearings. In a subsequent blog, posted on March 30, he writes: “If NATO needs me, I’m there.”

It is a shame that Professor Cole, a distinguished scholar, cannot think of a more worthy cause to which to devote his life.

David North

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