



An interview with Professor
Stephen Eric Bronner

The Fears and Hops of Emancipation in the West

Professor Stephen Eric Bronner is a noted political theorist and Distinguished Professor of Political Science, Comparative Literature, and German Studies at Rutgers University in New Brunswick.

Currently, he is Director of Global Relations at the Center for the Study of Genocide, Conflict Resolution, and Human Rights at Rutgers University, and member of Executive Committee of the UNESCO Chair for Genocide Prevention. Professor Bronner is the Executive Chair of US Academics for Peace and an advisor to Conscience International. His activities in civic diplomacy led him to visit Iran, Iraq, Palestine, Syria, Sudan, and Darfur. Many of his experiences are discussed in works dealing with internal relations like *Blood in the Sand* (2005) and *Peace out of Reach* (2007). Professor Bronner was the recipient of the MEPeace Award by the Network for Middle Eastern Politics in 2011.

Along with various teaching awards, the Bronner received the Michael A. Harrington Prize for Moments of Decision (1991) and Honorable Mention for the David Easton Prize, which honored the best work of political theory of the last five years, for *Reclaiming the Enlightenment* (2004).

A prolific writer, Professor Bronner has published over 25 books and 200 journal articles, and his work has been translated in more than a dozen languages. He received the Charles McCoy Lifetime Achievement Prize from the American Political Science Association in 2005.

عصر اندیشه | 'Emancipation' plays an important part in Critical Theory of international relations. But it is said that this concept is somehow vague and ambiguous. How do you define emancipation and how do you evaluate its role in Critical Theory?

Emancipation speaks to the moral autonomy of the individual, his or her ability to think differently, embrace unpopular beliefs, and challenge existing norms or, as Kant might have said, emerge from the kind of ethical immaturity whereby people are unable to make crucial life-decisions as they wish. Emancipation can never be complete: no system can ever actualize all the possibilities of freedom. As such, emancipation is a regulative ideal that has different dimensions: Kant put it best, perhaps, when he called for the abolition of those self-created "artifices" that keep humanity in a subaltern state. Another way of saying the same thing is the abolition of reification and the myriad ways in which people are turned into things—whether by capitalists treating workers as a mere "cost of production;" or authoritarian political systems treating people as subordinate to the state; or religious institutions imposing dogma upon them. Any meaningful understanding of "critique" needs a positive purpose. Such is the legacy of Kant Hegel and Marx for critical theory.

■ **Where does emancipation originate from? Does it have its origins in Marxism or can we trace it back before Marxism in Western thoughts?**

In my opinion, the desire for freedom has anthropological roots. It goes back to the beginnings of civilization with

Socrates insistence upon questioning authority, with slave revolts, bread riots, the hope of education. What emerges in modernity is not the desire for freedom, but the belief explicitly stated by Hegel that this desire is rational.

■ **Who do you consider to be the agent of emancipation? If this ideal is necessary to be implemented, then who is responsible for it?**

Let me put it this way: there is no longer a prefabricated agent like the revolutionary proletariat or Lenin's vanguard party. But it is still the case that working class solidarity is the precondition for revolutionary activity whether that activity takes the form of a national front or not. It is also the case that some form of political organization is necessary as well as a theory that targets specific institutions and explains the goals of the revolutionary enterprise.

■ **How do you explain the disappointment and pessimism of Frankfurt School's the first generation as regards emancipation? From their viewpoint, is it possible to implement emancipation by alienated one-dimensional men in modern societies?**

The pessimism of the Frankfurt School, in the first instance, derives from the failures of the international uprisings in the aftermath of the Russian Revolution, its totalitarian degeneration, and the rise of fascism. The reduction of culture to a commodity that targets the lowest common denominator, imperils critical reflection, and tends to eliminate opposition, is key to the emergence of "one-dimensional" society. Adorno and Horkheimer would essentially view resistance in terms of affirming the genuine subjectivity of the individual through sophisticated forms of art but Marcuse saw hope in the groups most "marginal" to the functioning of society (intellectuals, women, people of color, and the colonized) and believed that they might serve as a "catalysts" for a dormant yet still exploited working class.

■ **It seems that emancipation has lost its importance to famous contemporary critical thinkers like Jurgen Habermas or Andrew Linklater. they don't have any revolutionary motivations, they accept status quo dominated by liberal capitalism, and what they look for in their theories such as 'ideal speech situation', 'communicative action', 'inclusion', 'ethical universality', 'ethical cosmopolitanism' and 'obligation to foreigners' seem too idealistic and utopian. Don't you think that their strategies for emancipation are not feasible and accessible in a power-orientated and wealth- orientated world system?**

Thinkers like Habermas mistake the need for liberals to make sense of their world with the assumption that everyone is privileging liberal rationalism. So, for example, Habermas suggests that there are certain pragmatic universals that underpin communicative practice (allowing anyone to enter the discourse, providing arguments for a claim, proving willing to change one's opinion in the light of evidence etc). To deny any of this in attempting to communicate would, in his view, result in a "performative contradiction." That is

helpful if both participants in the conversation share the same (liberal) assumptions. Attacking a fascist for engaging in a "performative contradiction," would result in him responding "so what"?

■ **What do you mean by "domesticated" when you refer to some Critical Theory thinkers such as Habermas? Do you think they have forgotten the ideal of emancipation?**

When I speak about the domestication of critical theory, which incidentally became the title of an excellent book by Michael Thompson, I was referring to the general scholasticism, the preoccupation with subjectivity, and the lack of concern with the institutional obstacles to emancipation as well as the revolutions of 1989 and 2011 that are so much a part of our world. In short, I was referring to the retreat of critical theory from the social and the political in favor of the philosophical and the aesthetic. As I argued in *Reclaiming the Enlightenment*, which appeared in Farsi translation, any meaningful notion of socialism requires commitment to the liberal rule of law and republican institutions.

■ **We consider you as belong to the New Critical Theory who intend to return to Marxist tradition and legacy and to revive radical emancipation and utopian thought. Would you please explain your position? What changes do you look for in New Critical Theory?**

Yes; there has been a revival of radical critical theory, and figures like Marcuse, in Latin America and elsewhere in what was the third world. New forms of critical theory need to re-establish their connection with the political legacy of the Enlightenment, investigate the (changing) contradictions of capitalism and imperialism, and concern themselves with the foundations of solidarity and emancipatory purpose.

■ **Today we witness that many European young men are attracted to ISIS and other extremist groups like PEGIDA. What is the reason of this peculiar phenomenon from your viewpoint? Don't you think that they look for a revolutionary emancipation manifesto which they cannot find in Western societies?**

The reactionary wave of our time exists in the Occident and the Orient. Underlying both, in my opinion, is a (paranoid) fear of modernity that primarily infects pre-modern classes and the less economically developed sectors of society. it makes sense that these premodern classes should embrace premodern ideologies of racism, sexism, xenophobia and the like (often brought together in the form of conspiracy fetishism) to explain to what has occurred to their traditional forms of life and the disappearance of "the good old days." I tried to talk about this in my most recent book *The Bigot: Why Prejudice Persists*.

■ **Today we witness a 'religious turn' in the world even in Western societies. How do you evaluate 'the return of religion from exile' in relation to emancipation? Can religion and religious beliefs play a role in implementing emancipation?**

There has indeed been much discussion of the "post-

secular” society. Quite clearly the religious turn has been strengthened by the decline of Marxism as a theory of resistance. The resurgence of religion is a complicated matter. Religion has inspired secular visions of emancipation and utopia notions of emancipation that abolish alienation yet, at the same time, it is tied to a traditionalist and other-worldly frame of reference. Religion is indeed still “the sigh of the oppressed” but it is also still “the opium of the masses.” For all that, the issue is not religiosity or the belief in God, but rather the political activities of churches, mosques, and synagogues that identify their particular beliefs with those of the community at large. Dogmatism and ambition of this sort is what demands resistance by those committed to a better world.

■ **How do you predict the future of emancipation considering current world situation? Are you still optimistic that there are opportunities to criticize Capitalism and Imperialism and to offer emancipatory manifesto?**

Prospects for emancipation have always been “bad” but they have also always erupted unexpectedly. That was true in 1917 and in 1968 and in 1989 and in 2011, and it is true today. Liberal society still makes it possible to criticize capitalism and imperialism but that society is imperiled. The more progressive the society the better the chance for radical resistance. That is what history shows. And for good reason— a single taste of freedom is never enough; it always sparks the desire for more.

■ **How do you evaluate Islamic revolution of Iran as a movement for emancipation and against imperialism? What is your idea as a critical theory thinker about Islamic revolution and its capacity for emancipation?**

Emancipation and anti-imperialism are not the same thing. The Iranian Revolution was successful insofar as a sovereign state was established whose government was not indebted to one of the Western “great powers.” There as something unique about Iran’s ability to fit the republican form of government into a religious frame of reference: different factions contest one another for power, citizen’s vote, the judiciary has a certain degree of independence, regular elections take place, and the army is subordinate to the state. In short, whatever the obvious limits, the revolution realized the goal of national self-determination for the Iranian people.

Of course, there are deficits with respect to civil liberties, freedom to run for office, and institutional accountability. Corruption exists along with capital punishment, outdated sexual prohibitions, religious dogmatism, and the unequal treatment of women and minorities. Other issues of this sort, pertaining to the rule of law, can be raised as well. Even were these matters fully addressed, however, emancipation would remain incomplete. That is because emancipation or freedom is ever reducible to any set of social institutions. So the real question is whether Iran is on the right path and, at the end of their citizens will have to make that determination. ■

The New York Times

Zbigniew Brzezinski National Security Adviser to Jimmy Carter, Dies at 89

| By DANIEL LEWIS MAY 26, 2017

Zbigniew Brzezinski, the hawkish strategic theorist who was national security adviser to President Jimmy Carter in the tumultuous years of the Iran hostage crisis and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in the late 1970s, died on Friday at a hospital in Virginia. He was 89.

His death, at Inova Fairfax Hospital in Falls Church, was announced on Friday by his daughter, Mika Brzezinski, a co-host of the MSNBC program “Morning Joe.”

Like his predecessor Henry A. Kissinger, Mr. Brzezinski was a foreign-born scholar (he in Poland, Mr. Kissinger in Germany) with considerable influence in global affairs, both before and long after his official tour of duty in the White House. In essays, interviews and television appearances over the decades, he cast a sharp eye on six successive administrations, including that of Donald J. Trump, whose election he did not support and whose foreign policy, he found, lacked coherence.

Mr. Brzezinski was nominally a Democrat, with views that led him to speak out, for example, against the “greed,” as he put it, of an American system that compounded inequality. He was one of the few foreign policy experts to warn against the invasion of Iraq in 2003.

But in at least one respect — his rigid hatred of the Soviet Union — he had stood to the right of many Republicans, including Mr. Kissinger and President Richard M. Nixon. And during his four years under Mr. Carter, beginning in 1977, thwarting Soviet expansionism at any cost guided much of American foreign policy, for better or worse.

He supported billions in military aid for Islamic militants fighting invading Soviet troops in Afghanistan. He tacitly